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By Johnston McCulley

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Vol. 1 October, 1935 No. 2

Two Complete Book-Length Novels!

TRAIL OF MARKED MEN . . . . . **Johnston McCulley** 6

Dan Riley rode the fugitive trail after four killers. On his hatband were scared the names of those marked men, and he wasn't quitting the hunt until the last brand was vented. His trail grew hot at the Granton spread, rodded by a pard of those wanted four—and the heat was from a scorching gantlet of renegade guns. Dan Riley was ready for a killers' roundup when he got a note from the girl he loved. That note hurled him into a treachery trap that made him a marked man and turned the Granton spread into a hell-torn range.

THE KID FROM NOWHERE . . . . . **Lee Sage** 56

He had no name. He came from nowhere. Yet this hunger-lean maverick talked himself into a job roping gophers. And on the Rocking H outfit, he proved that he knew more about horses than the oldest range veteran. But he didn't know much about people. A girl's sweet tones flung him along a lobo trail into the murder maw of the Gray Wolfe's lair where his rope savvy snarled him in a suicide tangle.

Complete Short Story

THE SUICIDE BRAND . . . . . **Clint Douglas** 116

Two deputies of Hellspur had disappeared. Their horses—saddles empty—were found in front of their office. Their six-guns—one shot fired—were hanging on their saddlehorns. Then young Cutty Lorant became the third deputy—and buckled on suicide sixes!

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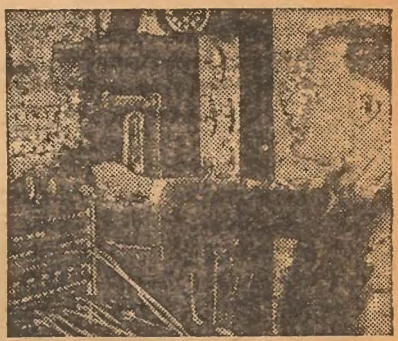

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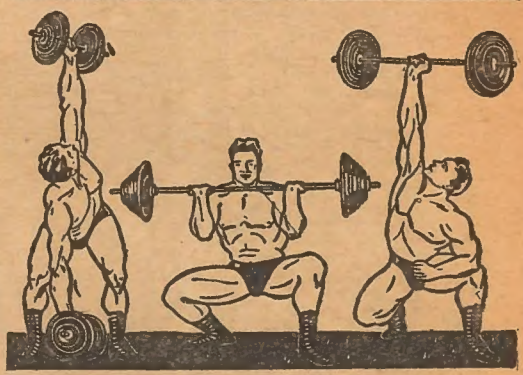

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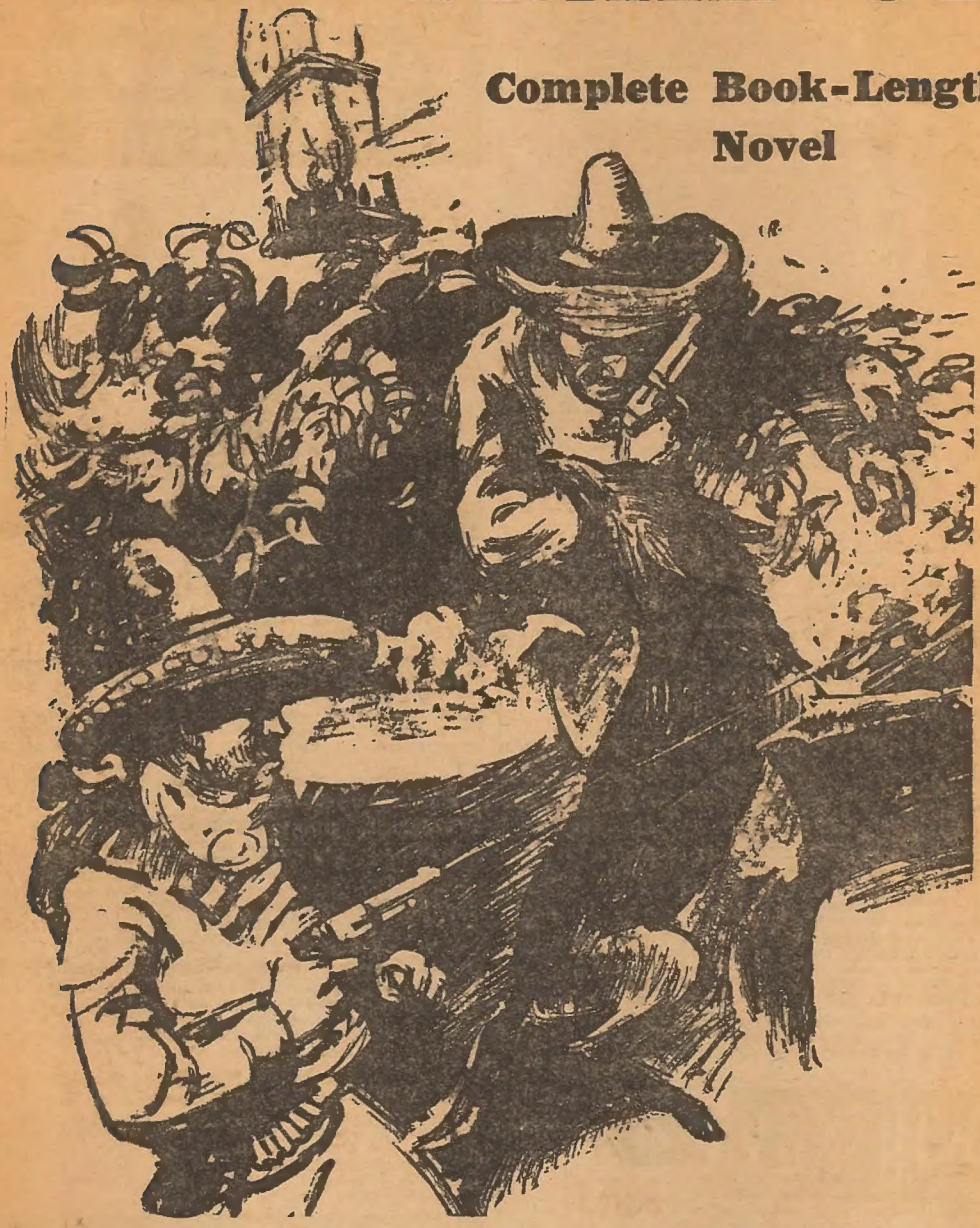
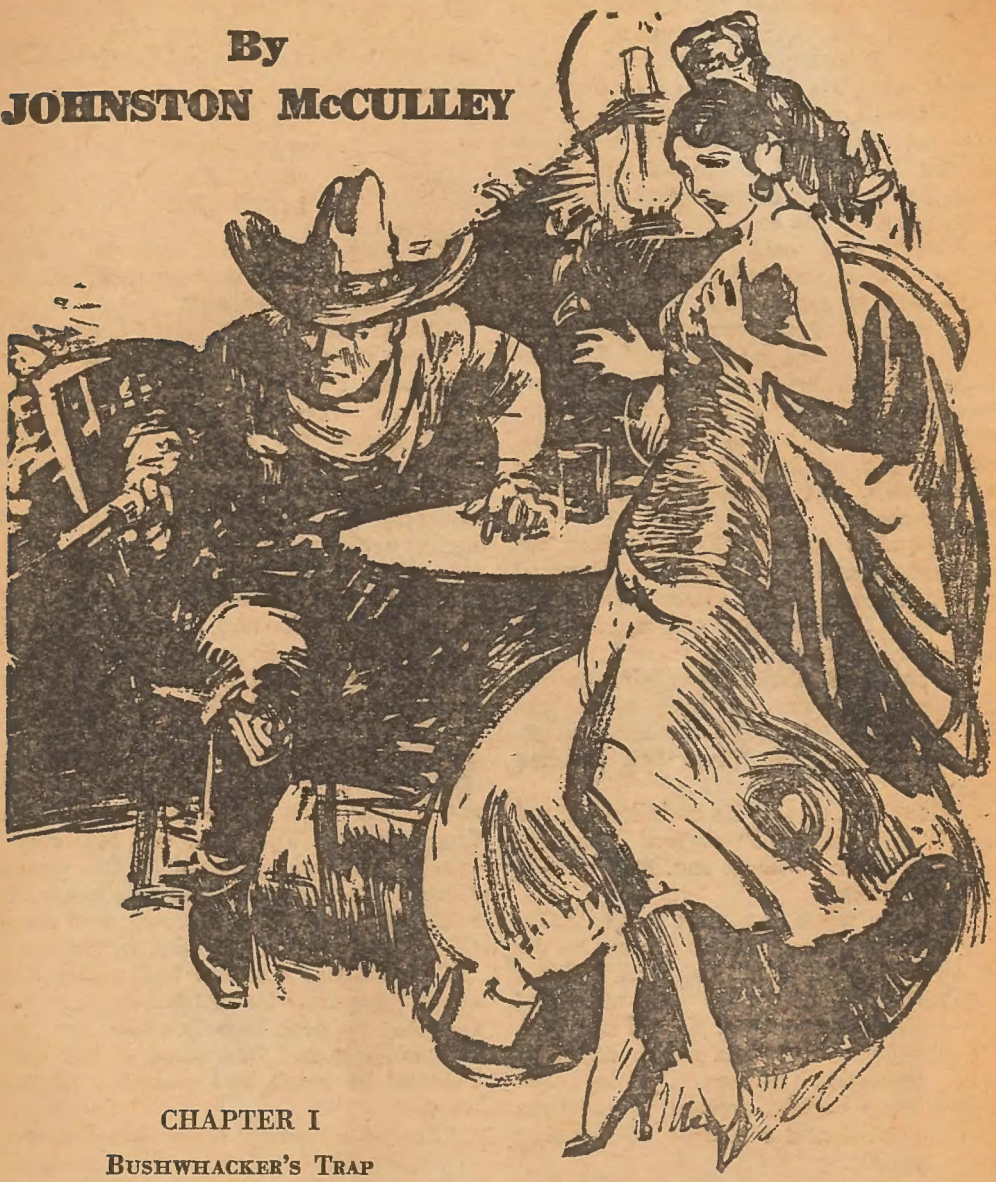


Dan Riley rode the fugitive trail after four killers. On his hatband were seared the names of those marked men, and he wasn't quitting the hunt until the last brand was vented. His trail grew hot at the Granton spread, rodded by a pard of those wanted four—and the heat was from a scorching gantlet of renegade guns. Dan Riley was ready for a killers' roundup when he got a note from the girl he loved. That note hurled him into a treachery trap that made him a marked man and turned the Granton spread into a hell-torn range.

MARKED MEN

By

JOHNSTON McCULLEY



CHAPTER I

BUSHWHACKER'S TRAP

AS he followed the dusty trail at an easy lope around the curve and through the narrow cut, the wind was howling in the ears of Don Esteban Marcos Pulido, and blowing in the wrong direction—so he did not hear the shot.

Nor did he hear the second shot, and the roar of rage that accompanied it. Had he heard, he probably would have pulled up his horse abruptly and refused to continue along the trail until he was sure he would not ride into trouble—which was a thing Don Esteban tried to avoid.

Don Esteban Marcos Pulido was not really a don, and the Pulidos would not have owned him. That was only a high-sounding name he had given himself, and all men knew it, so there was no deception.

He was fat and forty-five and, like lightning, always followed the path of least resistance. But he had a good horse and gear, and fair clothes, and always managed to find food for his fat belly—and what man can ask for more?

Now he slouched to one side of the saddle, with his neckcloth up over mouth and nostrils, and his eyes half closed. He was traveling to the town of Mesaville, on the border, and it was hot and dusty. Don Esteban was dreaming of the Mesaville cantina, the interior of which was semidark and cool, and redolent of odors of food and drink.

Something carried by the wind came over the top of the cut and dropped in the middle of the trail a short distance ahead of Don Esteban. The horse he bestrode snorted and shied, and Don Esteban was almost thrown. He became alert, worked for an instant with both reins and rowels, and righted both the horse and himself.

"Son of a coyote!" Don Esteban exclaimed, speaking through his clenched teeth. "Grandson of a ground owl! Have you taken leave of your senses, offspring of a horned toad?"

In the trail ahead, something moved and rolled forward a little as it was tossed by the wind, and the horse snorted and shied again. Then, Don Esteban saw.

"Why, it is a hat!" he exclaimed, aloud and in surprise. "*El Sombrero!* It also appears to be an excellent one. And what is it doing here?"

Now his horse saw that it was nothing but a hat being shifted around by the wind, and grew calm, and Don Esteban touched with the spurs and compelled the animal to go closer. He did not wish to get down out of the saddle unless it was absolutely necessary, since that called for a certain amount of exertion. He inspected the sombrero by bending over slightly.

It was, indeed, an excellent article, not something that had been discarded on the trail as worthless. There was a wide leather band around it, which seemed to be carved. Don Esteban decided that it might be worth the effort of getting down into the dust. So he growled and puffed, and dismounted, and looped the reins over his arm.

He picked up the sombrero and knocked some of the fine dust from it. Squinting against the glare of the sun, he inspected it well. Yes, it was a good hat! And the leather band—

Don Esteban grunted his surprise and examined the leather band again. It was not exactly carved. Names had been cut into the leather, and Don Esteban could read them easily:

AKERS
BANCORD
WHALEN
LACHMER

Far back in the dim recesses of Don Esteban's fat head, memory cells stirred, though not quite enough.

Akers! Bancord! Whalen! Lachmer!

Those four names had some queer association, Don Esteban knew, but he could not remember what. That troubled him. There was something he should know, and the knowledge evaded him.

He turned the sombrero over and over and read the names on the leather band again, seeking some light in the darkness. But he was compelled to give it up. He had heard something, somewhere and sometime, and he had forgotten it. And it was too hot to do much thinking. Anyhow, it was a good hat, and he did not intend to leave it there in the trail.

HIS horse snorted and shied again, and Don Esteban turned toward the animal with an imprecation rolling from his lips. The wind was still howling in his ears, blowing in the wrong direction, hence he did not hear the hoofbeats of a horse in the soft dust as a rider came around the bend in the trail.

Don Esteban's mount had pulled him along for a distance of ten feet or so before he stopped. Don Esteban, for the moment, was lost in a cloud of fine dust churned by hoofs and scattered by the wind.

"Son of a lizard!" cried Don Esteban. "Unspeakable beast with little brains!"

Even the rush of the wind did not kill the voice he heard now, and which seemed to speak into his left ear:

"When you're done insultin' your horse, hombre, maybe you'll give me my hat!"

Don Esteban whirled around as though a sweat bee had stung him on the back of his fat neck. His lower jaw dropped quickly in an expression of surprise. He beheld another horseman leaning for-

ward in his saddle, his forearms crossed over the pommel, and regarding him narrowly.

The first glance told Don Esteban that this man was tall and lean. The second glance took in the rider's face, and revealed a determined chin and piercing eyes. Above the face was a thatch of flaming red hair.

"The wind caught that sombrero of mine and switched it off my head," the rider explained. "I saw her sail over the rocks and into the cut. Glad you caught it for me."

"It is a pleasure, señor," said Don Esteban. But it was not a pleasure. He had hoped to retain the sombrero.

"Hand it up here," the rider demanded.

Don Esteban handed it up, and then got into his own saddle.

"If you're going to Mesaville, come along," the rider said, as he put the sombrero on his head and adjusted it to his satisfaction. "I'm ridin' that way. Or maybe you don't want to travel along with me."

"It will be a pleasure, señor."

"Yeah? Don't be too damned sure. Travelin' with me ain't always a pleasure. Sometimes it's right down dangerous."

"I shall do nothing to anger you, señor."

The redheaded one laughed as they started their horses, side by side, through the narrow cut. "I ain't meanin' exactly that I'm dangerous myself, though I sure can be at times. But there's certain hombres like to take a shot at me now and then, and often they shoot wild. One took a shot at me a minute back. He was wild. He won't be wild again."

"Señor! You mean—?"

"I mean he tried to bushwhack me, and missed. But I didn't. You can take a look at him, and see if you know him. I don't."

"If you do not know him, señor, why should he try to kill you?" Don Esteban asked. "Perhaps he made a mistake."

"He knew who he was after, all right! His mistake was in bein' a poor shot, and then stickin' up his head to see whether he'd scored a hit. Horse there behind the rocks, too. We'll take it on to Mesaville."

Don Esteban felt the shivers chasing up and down his spine. Here was trouble—and he did not like trouble. And this redheaded one was so cool and calm about it.

They rode around the curve and out of the cut, and Don Esteban's trail companion pointed to a bunch of rocks off to the left.

"Right there!" he said. "Come along."

DON ESTEBAN was compelled to follow. He had a feeling that this man would resent it if he did not, and he had no desire to arouse the enmity of a man who shot to kill with such little compunction.

They left the trail and rode to the rocks, and the redheaded one pointed. A man was sprawled there, face downward and quite dead. A short distance away, a frightened horse stood tethered to a tree, ears uplifted in question.

"Know him?" the redhead demanded. He had dismounted and turned the dead man over.

"I never saw him before, señor," Don Esteban said.

"We'll ride on to Mesaville with his horse. Maybe some of his friends will come out and get him."

A few minutes later, they were in the trail again and traveling on toward the town, which was a cluster of brown and white dots in the distance. The redhead led the horse of the dead man, and Don Esteban rode beside him, scarcely knowing whether to admire or fear.

"What's your name?" the other demanded suddenly.

"Señor, I am Don Esteban Marcos Pulido."

"I reckon you're a liar."

"Señor?"

"'Way back in my brain there's somethin' that seems to tell me your name's Pedro—"

"Señor!" It was a wild cry that Don Esteban gave, one of fear.

"'S all right with me. I've got a good memory, huh? We'll forget it, hombre. To me, you're Don Esteban and all the rest of it."

"I thank you, señor! Once, when I was but a boy, I did something—"

"Forget it! We all do something—Some of us change our names afterward—and some of us change our natures. It's a lot better, hombre, when you don't

have to change anything but your name."

"I presume that is true, señor."

"You're damned right it's true! Me—I haven't changed my name any. But I've changed some, hombre—I've changed! However, that's enough of that!"

"If it is not asking too much, señor, may I know how to address you?" Don Esteban asked. "Since you have not changed your name—"

"I ain't changed it any. But some folks have invented one they use in place of it sometimes. They call me El Sombrero!"

The eyes of Don Esteban grew wide. *"Dios!"* he breathed.

CHAPTER II

Dead Man's Horse

THE memory cells of Don Esteban worked at a furious rate of speed now, so swiftly that they startled him. Fragments became thoughts, and the thoughts became a story.

Dan Riley had been a Texas Ranger. There had been a little affair of robbery and murder, in which several men were concerned. Dan Riley had taken the trail for the purpose of either bringing in the malefactors, else leaving them where they always could be found with dirt above them and boards at their heads.

Dan Riley was young and romantic, and he stopped the night at a certain cantina. The owner of the cantina, Pablo Lopez by name, had a charming daughter, Carmelita, whose flashing eyes had intrigued scores of men.

Carmelita Lopez served Dan Riley when he ate, and carried him drink, sang a bit around the table, and used her eyes to good advantage. Nothing particularly wrong in that—Carmelita was no light baggage.

But Carmelita had ideas, and she had been born and reared in a district where nine-tenths of the men were dodging the law. Her own father's record was none too white. And she thought it would be a great thing to outwit a ranger.

So she flirted with Dan Riley and coaxed him to buy a bottle of wine. And when she served the wine, she slipped into Dan Riley's glass a pinch of powder. Riley awoke the following day when the sun was high, to find himself propped against the wall in the patio, his head splitting and his tongue thick—and the men he pursued gone where there was no trail to follow.

The story got out. The ranger became "Romance" Riley, and his captain called him in and told him certain things, the least of which was that no longer was he a ranger.

However, he had been a good man, and even a good man may make a mistake. Hence, a deal was made. Dan Riley could go forth on his own, and find his men, and bring them in or plant them, as seemed most expedient. When he had done that, perhaps he would be looked upon with favor again.

But the quarry had scattered, and the trail was cold. Dan Riley rode continually, in every direction, always searching, stopping at times to work and replenish his purse. The quest was a joke at first. But iron entered the soul of Dan Riley, and his face grew grim, and the men whispered that some day he would meet those he sought. It was no longer a joke. It was a desperate manhunt upon which Dan Riley was engaged.

Akers! Bancord! Whalen! Lachmer! Those were the men Riley sought. He wore a hat with a wide leather band, upon which those names had been carved, and he had announced that, as he got his men, he would take a hot running iron and sear out the names, one at a time. Always providing that they did not get him first. So, some men called him El Sombrero, as well as Romance Riley.

The four had been living below the line, playing the bandit game. But Don Esteban knew, from gossip, that they were now in the States again, and evidently Dan Riley knew it, and at last was on their trail. And Don Esteban knew something else, which he believed Dan Riley did not—that Pablo Lopez now operated the cantina in Mesaville, and that his daughter, Carmelita, was there, still making eyes.

"What's troublin' you, hombre?" Riley asked. "You look sick."

"Perhaps it is the heat," said Don Esteban.

"You're a liar again, I reckon. You wilted when I said that some men call me El Sombrero. So you know the story, huh? Oh, you needn't be afraid to say so! It's all right with me."

"I have heard it. Señor Riley," Don Esteban admitted. "You are stopping at Mesaville, señor?"

"Yeah, I'm stoppin' at Mesaville. Maybe there's a hombre or two around there that I want to see."

"I thought, perhaps, you sought employment with the Señor John Granton."

"Who's he?" Riley asked.

"Recently, he purchased five big ranches, señor, and made them into one. He is the president of a great syndicate. Their holdings fill the valleys on either side of Mesaville."

"I did hear somethin' about that."

"He has been engaging men by the score, señor, and will employ none but the best."

"I ain't got time just now to go punchin' cows," Riley said. "I work when I've got to have money for expenses, but I've got some now. This here John Granton must be a big man."

"He is rich, señor. He has commanding ways. And he has a beautiful daughter, the Señorita Betty—"

"That's enough, Riley snapped. "If we're goin' to be trail pals, Esteban, you've got to know one thing—never mention women to me! Understand? I hate 'em! I hate the whole tribe of 'em! Never even mention 'em to me! Do you hear?"

"It shall be as you say, Señor Riley."

"You'll live longer, if it is," Riley informed him. His eyes had blazed for a moment, but now his face became inscrutable again. "What do you do for a livin'?" he asked.

"Whoever I may, señor."

"Yeah? You're cussed honest about it. That little affair of yours happened about twenty years ago, didn't it? I've read about it in the records. A drunken brawl, and you knifed another man. Then changed your name and took the trail. That's been wiped off the books a long time."

DAN RILEY turned his head a bit and looked out across the parched land, where the black heat waves were dancing. Don Esteban guessed that he was experiencing a spasm of emotion, and did not wish to reveal the fact. It occurred to Don Esteban that he might bask in a sort of reflected glory, if he was the friend and constant companion of this man. There would be a certain amount of danger, it was true, but the danger would be offset by fame.

"We'll be friends," Riley told him finally. "But always remember this—don't mention women to me!"

"I shall remember it, señor."

Don Esteban almost choked as he said it, for he had been at the point of telling Riley of Carmelita's presence in Mesaville. However, there was a way out. Carmelita's father was not a woman, hence Don Esteban could mention him.

"There is now an excellent cantina in Mesaville, señor," Don Esteban said. "It is more than a cantina. There are sleeping rooms around the patio, and good food and drink, and accommodations for horses when one does not wish to turn one's mount into the common corral."

"Fine!" Riley said. "I'll look it over."

"Some months ago, it was purchased by a man who came from elsewhere, and he made certain improvements."

"Who is he?" Riley asked. "Maybe I know him. Funny if I don't! I know every cantina owner along the border."

The moment had come. Don Esteban seemed to shiver a little, and pretended to be looking at the distant hills. He gulped, and spoke:

"His name is Pablo Lopez, señor."

"Why, damn you—!"

Don Esteban jerked his head around quickly, and saw Riley's face flaming and Riley's right hand reaching for his six-gun. But El Sombrero curbed his ire. His face changed, and then he laughed.

"You're damn clever, Esteban!" he said. "Gave me the tip, and yet—"

"I mentioned no woman," Don Esteban supplied.

"Right! Just this once, Esteban—has this here Pablo Lopez a daughter named Carmelita?"

"It is the same, señor."

"And has she been married, or is she still with her father in the cantina?"

"She is still with her father, señor."

"That'll be enough about her. But thanks for the tip," Riley said.

They rode on, both silent now, for Riley did not seem to wish to continue the conversation, and Esteban was too wise to start it, not knowing for certain the other's mood. He could not tell whether Dan Riley was dreaming of love or planning revenge.

They were getting close to the town now. For a time they rode down in a depression, and when they mounted to the

level again they were within a short distance of the little plaza around which the buildings of Mesaville were grouped.

Riley headed straight toward the cantina, an adobe building which sprawled at the side of the trail. A few men were loitering around it, and a few more wandered around the other buildings, keeping in the shade. Dirty children and mangy dogs played near the adobe huts which formed the residential section of Mesaville.

"It sure ain't much of a town," Riley commented.

"But there are strangers coming and going continually, señor. This trail runs straight below the Line."

"Yeah! And I understand that some certain hombres have been travelin' it lately—toward the north. That's why I'm here," Riley said. "A man can always get news of travelers at a cantina."

"What is to be done with the dead man's horse?" Esteban asked.

"We'll turn him into the public corral, and see what happens."

THEY swung away from the cantina and rode to the public corral behind it. Don Esteban remained in his saddle, but Riley dismounted, took the saddle and bridle from the dead man's horse and put them against the corral fence, and turned the animal into the enclosure.

From the near distance, all this was watched carefully by perhaps a dozen men. At the same time, Dan Riley was watching them, seeing if he could identify any of them, estimating them as possible antagonists.

One left the group, and approached. He was a tall, gaunt man with a mean visage. He leaned against the corral and looked at the horse inside, and then at Riley.

"So you've got an extra horse and outfit, huh?" he asked. "Are you wantin' to sell him?"

"Oh, he ain't mine!" Riley explained. "I just happened to pick him up out on the trail."

"And him with bridle and saddle on? Maybe you left some hombre afoot out there."

"Oh, I don't reckon so!" Riley told him. "This here horse didn't seem to have anybody to take care of him right, so I brought him in."

"Yeah? He looks a lot like Bill Morgan's horse," the gaunt man said. "Matter o' fact, he is Bill Morgan's horse."

"So that's the name of his owner, huh? You know him?" Riley's voice rasped like a file against metal.

"Yeah, I know him."

"Then maybe you'll be able to locate some of his friends."

"Sure! But what for?"

"Tell 'em that they'll find Bill Morgan about five miles out the trail, just this side of the cut—dead!"

"What's that—dead?" the gaunt man gasped.

"Yeah! He made a mistake, Bill Morgan did—he shot and missed." Without answering, the gaunt man turned and strode back to the cantina, where he held speech with the others. Dan Riley got into the saddle, and rode slowly beside Esteban, both watching closely, and neither speaking. They rode to the hitch rail on the shady side of the cantina building, dismounted, and tethered their horses.

The men who had been loitering in the shade outside the cantina had disappeared, and Riley did not doubt that they had gone inside, and were discussing him. He spent a little time slapping the fine trail dust from his clothes, and stretching to remove saddle cramps, and Esteban emulated his example.

They walked slowly around the corner of the building and approached the entrance, and Esteban managed to get a stride ahead. Through the open door they stepped, to stand quickly to one side, and blink and focus their eyes to the soft semigloom of the building's interior.

Riley adjusted his gunbelt and holster as he peered around the big room, and then started swinging across it toward the head of the bar. But Esteban was before him.

"Greetings, hombres!" he cried. "It is I, Don Esteban Marcos Pulido, come once more among you. Let there be joy and merriment! Bring me wine and a guitar, and I shall sing you songs!"

On another occasion, such an entrance probably would have caused a gale of laughter, and men would have howled at him, and rushed forward to slap him on the back and make him welcome. But now there was an ominous quiet

ABOUT half a dozen men were grouped near the foot of the bar. As many more were standing together on the opposite side of the room. Behind the bar, Pablo Lopez was polishing a glass with a greasy towel.

"Here, you!" Riley snapped at him. He flipped a coin on the board.

Pablo Lopez approached slowly. His eyes were wide, and his face pasty, and he was shaking. He gulped, and licked at his lips as though they had been parched.

"A bottle, and two glasses," Riley ordered. "It's been a hot and dusty trail."

"It—it is you, señor!" Lopez gulped.

"Yeah! So you're down in this part of the country now, huh? You move around a lot, don't you, Lopez?"

"Señor! Let me say something, I beg of you. What happened that time—it was not of my doing. I did not know that it was occurring, señor. Not until afterwards was I aware of what actually had happened."

"Am I doin' any talkin' about it now?" Riley demanded. "You seem to be shakin' and shiverin' a lot, for such a hot day. Get out the bottle and glasses. We're about ready to choke."

Though the expression in his face was that of a man reprieved from death, Lopez said nothing more. He got out the bottle and glasses, and took the coin because Riley insisted, then stood back and watched the pair drink. He glanced imploringly at the men down the bar, and at the others across the room, trying to flash them a message, but they did not understand.

They started from both directions, walking slowly but with evident determination, to converge near where Riley and Esteban were standing. Riley spoke to Esteban from the corner of his mouth.

"Get away from me," he said.

"But, señor, I am your friend! It is my right to help—"

"Get from behind me, fool!"

Don Esteban realized that he was in the line of fire if hostilities commenced. But he refused to show fright. He brought forth materials and began the manufacture of a cigarette, and as he made it he moved aside, yawning, his manner nonchalant. But he was alert and watchful.

Riley began making a cigarette also, standing with his back toward the wall, and facing those who approached. His feet were planted far apart, and his body was well balanced. Those who knew him best would have said that he was in a position to let his right hand drop to his holster with lightning-like speed.

The gaunt man who had visited the corral seemed to be spokesman for the group.

"We'd like to know what you meant, mister, by sayin' that Bill Morgan's dead," he said.

"That's what I mean. Anyhow, the man who was ridin' that horse I turned into the corral's dead."

"And how did it happen?"

Dan Riley popped the cigarette into his mouth, thumbed a match, and ignited the smoke. He gave a preliminary puff, then bent forward a little, and his eyes met those of the gaunt man squarely.

"I'm tellin' you," Riley said. "I was ridin' along the trail, tendin' to my own business, and this gent tried to bushwhack me. He missed—and I let him have it. Then I brought in his horse, which he'd tied to a tree. That's all!"

"Yeah? Maybe it ain't all," the gaunt man said. "Bill Morgan's got some friends here."

"That ain't worryin' me a mite," Riley told him. "I didn't know the hombre, but I know when I'm shot at. And I've got some enemies. This here Bill Morgan was tryin' to do the job for somebody else. I reckon. Maybe somebody afraid to do it himself. But he didn't do it at all proper."

THE gaunt man glanced past Riley, to where Don Esteban was standing against the wall and twisting his cigarette in his fingers. "What do you know about all this, Esteban?" he demanded. "You came ridin' into town with this hombre."

It was the first test of the new friendship. Esteban took a step forward and made ready to speak, prepared to stand by his friend whatever the cost. But, as he would have spoken, Riley waved him aside.

"He don't know anything about it at all, except what I told him," Riley said. "I met up with him after the gunnin'. I showed him the dead man, and he said he'd never seen him before."

"And who are you?" the gaunt man demanded. "What's your business?

Where'd you come from, and where are you goin'—if you ever leave here at all?"

Dan Riley grinned at him. "Them ain't polite questions—none of 'em," he pointed out. "But I don't mind answerin'. I ain't got anything to hide—like some. My name's Dan Riley."

"*El Sombrero!*" some man exclaimed.

"That's what I'm called by some," Riley admitted. "Since you know that much, I reckon you know my business, too. I'm lookin' for certain gents. And I ain't allowin' anything or anybody to bother me while I'm doin' my lookin'. If that's all, hombres, kindly back away! I'm goin' to that table in the corner, and I want somethin' to eat. You hear that, Lopez?"

He started straight toward them, his arms swinging at his sides, and Esteban followed a few feet behind him, under the impression that he was guarding Riley's back. Those in front gave way to either side, making a lane, and Dan Riley walked through it, not hurrying at all, not nervous in the slightest degree. He eyed those nearest him, and they fell back, and Riley passed them as though unaware of their presence. On to the table he went, and pulled up a stool and sat down.

Don Esteban approached him. "Is there anything I can do to be of service, señor?" he asked.

"Yeah! You can keep away from me for the present," Riley told him. "You're sure cookin' up a pot of trouble for yourself showin' wide and open that you're throwin' in with me."

"But I am your friend, Señor Dan, and your enemies are mine. If there is to be trouble—"

"If there is, I won't be needin' you," Riley interrupted. "There ain't a man in that bunch for me to worry about—as long as he's in front of me."

CHAPTER III

Carmelita Talks

DON ESTEBAN retreated with the grace of a hidalgo, though reluctantly, and returned to the end of the bar, where there were dainty morsels of food and a man could eat without paying anything, provided Lopez did not watch him too closely.

The men in the cantina had drawn together again, and were talking in low tones. Riley could not make out what they were saying. Presently, they crowded to the bar and had drinks, then the majority of them departed.

Lopez hurried across to the table.

"Food, and plenty of it!" Riley ordered. "And if the grub's doctored any—"

"Señor Riley, I swear there will be nothing wrong with the food. I shall watch its preparation, and will eat some of it myself."

"I'll be wantin' a room, too, and I want you to put up my horse so's he can have a real feed."

"Then it is your intention to remain in Mesaville?" Lopez asked, his eyes wide.

"Yeah! Until I get damned good and ready to go somewhere else. Why not?"

"There may be danger."

"What of it?" Riley asked. "Danger and me—we're pals."

"But, one man against so many! Those friends of Bill Morgan have gone for a wagon, and will drive out and get the body. After the sunset funeral, they may drink and grow angry."

"Then let 'em get angry at the hombre who set this Bill Morgan to watch for me and bump me out of my saddle. That's the gent for 'em to be angry at."

"And there is also—" Lopez began.

"Are you maybe tryin' to scare me and run me away from your cantina?" Riley interrupted. "You've sure changed some, Lopez. You used to want trade."

"I do want trade, señor—but not trouble in my place," Lopez said. "Those men for whom you are searching—suppose they come here?"

"Nothin' I can think of would please me better'n that, Lopez. Maybe you might be able to arrange it for me, huh? Any of 'em in the neighborhood now?"

"Señor! Do not compel me to take sides in a quarrel," Lopez begged. "I am a man of business, and such must keep friends with everybody."

"Uh-huh! But you won't be a man of business much longer, if you don't answer my questions. It's information I'm after, Lopez. And be damned sure you don't tell me anything but the truth! I've already got one score to settle with you."

The perspiration suddenly popped out on Lopez's greasy face, as his eyes met those of Riley.

"Do not say that, señor!" he begged. "Am I to be held responsible for the tricks of a misbehaving girl? I swear I knew nothing of that until—"

"It's information I'm after, I said. Have I got to wait all day for it?"

"Very well, señor—and I hope this does not cause me serious trouble. It is whispered that one of the men you seek, Sam Akers, is even now working on the big Granton ranch. He is an assistant foreman, and has charge of some men."

Dan Riley sat up straight on his stool, plainly surprised.

"Lopez, are you tellin' me that this here Mr. Granton would give a job to a hombre like Sam Akers? He's a known outlaw, a bandit, a horse and cattle thief. That's no secret."

"Nevertheless, señor, he is working at the ranch. And the three others you seek—they are expected to arrive soon, and go to work on the Granton ranch also."

"There's somethin' damned funny about that!" Riley declared. "Them four sure ain't noted for work, and it's too late for 'em to reform and get honest. That's sure somethin' for me to think about. And, while I'm thinkin', suppose you go out and rustle me some grub. Hurry it up!"

"At once, señor."

"And when it's ready, let Carmelita come in and wait on me," Riley added.

"Señor!" Lopez exhibited alarm. "You, a strong and brave man, surely would not offer harm to a girl."

"Did I say anything about harmin' her? Maybe I only want to see her eyes sparkle, and hear her sing. Get goin', Lopez!"

IT was ten minutes before Carmelita Lopez appeared. She had dressed herself for the occasion. But her face was pale, and fright was in her eyes. She had a sense of guilt in front of Dan Riley. On that day when she had drugged him, she had hidden until he had ridden away, and had not seen him since.

Riley puffed at his cigarette and scrutinized her as she put the food upon the table. He did not speak. Carmelita grew nervous.

"Is there anything else you wish, señor?" she asked.

"That looks like plenty grub," he said. "Yeah, you've got the same pretty eyes! You been leadin' any more men astray?"

"Señor! I did not realize at the time. To me, it was but a joke, to fix a ranger so he could not get his man!"

"A joke!" Riley extinguished his cigarette and reached for knife and fork. "It got me kicked out of the service, and laughed at from one end of the country to the other. Romance Riley—that's me! I know they're callin' me that. It's cost me almost two years of runnin' around searchin' for certain hombres. It may cost me a lot more yet. Yeah, it was a swell joke!"

"I'm truly sorry, señor!" she said.

Riley looked up at her again as he masticated a mouthful of food.

"You are like—blazes!" he said. "You still think it was a smart trick. I wouldn't be surprised if you've doped my coffee now."

"Please, señor!" she begged.

"You're a pretty little devil!" Riley complimented. "It's the pretty ones as cause all the trouble."

She stepped closer to the table and talked in whispers. "I'll help you, señor," she said. "The Señor Sam Akers—he comes to the cantina often. And I know that he is coming tonight."

"Akers comin' here tonight?"

"I heard him when he was last here, señor. He rides in from the big Granton ranch tonight, to play poker with some of the men."

"Uh-huh! He'll probably know I'm here, long before he arrives. 'Less I miss my guess, somebody's already ridden out to tell him. Say, Carmelita, who's the lanky hombre who seemed to be bossin' the crowd around here?"

"That is the Señor Pete Drake. He does not seem to work, yet he always has plenty of money to spend."

"And he's friendly with Sam Akers, huh?"

"Quite friendly with him, señor."

"Thanks! That'll be all for the present, Carmelita."

She stepped close to the table again. "I am forgiven for what I did?" she asked.

"Not yet, you ain't! That'll sure take some forgivin'," Riley said. "'Twasn't like I'd been fool enough to fall in love with you and forget my business. You took an advantage—doped my drink."

"Would it take a fool, señor, to fall in love with me?" she asked, dimpling.

"You might as well cut that out, Carmelita," he said. "I ain't any mark for a woman. You turned me against 'em!"

Her face grew serious. "Perhaps, señor, I may prove it otherwise before the end," she said.

"It'll sure take some provin'."

Riley got up from the table and moved slowly across the room toward the door, and Don Esteban left the bar and followed him.

"Esteban, you'd better decide not to be my friend," Riley said, as they walked toward their horses. "Somethin' tells me that there'll be fireworks tonight, and my friends ain't goin' to be popular."

"But I enjoy fireworks, señor," Don Esteban declared.

RILEY told him that they would put their horses in Lopez' adobe stable instead of the corral, because diseased stock might have been in the latter. They untied their mounts, and Riley swung up into the saddle. Esteban was busy inspecting a cinch.

Out of the trail and into the town came a thunder of hoofs. Somebody gave a strident yell, and other voices echoed it. Riley touched with the spurs and jumped his horse around the corner of the cantina building, to ascertain the meaning of the commotion.

Across the plaza tore a huge black horse, ridden by a girl in riding breeches, who now was standing in the stirrups and fighting to get her frenzied mount under control. Some distance behind her rode a man, unable to overtake the flying black.

On the other side of the plaza there was a sudden chorus of screams. Riley jerked his head around to look. Half a dozen small children were playing there in the dust, and two frantic mothers were rushing toward them.

A moment later Riley's mount crashed against the black, then raced side by side with him. Riley had an instant's vision of gleaming eyes, dilated and foam-flecked nostrils. Then his right hand shot out, and he grasped the reins close to the bit.

Riley tugged at the reins again, and felt the black give a little. He guided him in an arc. They swept so close to the children that they were deluged with a shower of gravel and dust. The children and the two mothers were safe, but the black was not conquered.

Riley raced with him past the cantina building, and toward the slope of the hill behind the town. His own horse was tiring, but the black seemed as strong as ever. The girl had ceased fighting since Riley had grasped the reins, and was clinging to the saddle, badly frightened.

Again, Riley swerved the black, and now had him in soft ground, where the going was heavier. He began to tire, as Riley's horse was tiring. Riley tugged and pulled, and turned him back toward the plaza again.

He knew that he had won a victory now. He fought the big black down to a walk, and finally brought him to a standstill a short distance from the cantina. The man who had been pursuing was riding up, and Don Esteban was urging his own mount in that direction.

Now that the danger was over, the girl riding the black started to sway out of the saddle. Dan Riley threw an arm around her quickly.

"Here! Buck up!" he snapped. "There ain't anything to faint about."

"I—I'm all right," she muttered.

"Yeah? You're about ready to keel over, if anybody's askin' me."

"I—want to thank you—those children—"

"Save your thanks!" Riley said ungraciously. "And after this don't ever ride a horse you can't handle."

That brought her up straight in the saddle. "I can handle him," she said.

"Yeah, I saw you doin' it!"

"Something frightened him, and he bolted. He never did that before. I'll show him that I can handle him. I'll ride him till he drops. I'll get him out on the trail—"

"There you go, takin' it out on the horse," Riley said. "It's just like a woman."

The man came riding up. Riley saw that he was an important-looking indi-

vidual just past middle age. There was an air of command about him.

"Are you all right, Betty?" he called.

"Yes, father—thanks to this gentleman."

"That was splendid!" her father cried. "Never saw anything better. You know how to handle horses."

"Been handlin' them all my life," Riley replied, smiling a bit.

"I'm John Granton. This is my daughter, Betty. We both owe you a lot for this piece of work."

"That's all right," Riley said. He gathered up his reins. "Glad I happened to be in my saddle and handy. I was tellin' the young lady she shouldn't ever ride a horse she can't handle. He might bolt with her sometime when there wasn't anybody around to help."

John Granton threw back his head and laughed, as the girl's face grew red.

"That's good!" Granton said. "Betty's taken more prizes for riding than any girl who ever saw a horse show. She's been just a little too proud about it. Possibly this affair will lessen her conceit."

"Well—I'll be goin'," Riley said. He saw Don Esteban waiting a short distance away.

"Wait, please," Granton said. "Possibly you know of my ranch? I'm always looking for good men. Can't get enough. Mind telling me your name?"

"Dan Riley. I'm a ranger, but just now I'm on the detached list and with a rovin' commission."

"I was thinking of offering you a job, if you want one."

RILEY started to say that he did not want one. But a sudden thought came to him, and he hesitated. Granton was the man who hired Sam Akers, and who, according to Lopez, was also going to hire the other three men Riley had been pursuing. Surely, there was some mystery about that.

"Well—?" Granton asked.

"Could I speak to you alone a minute, sir?" Riley asked.

"Surely! You're going to the store, aren't you, Betty?"

"Yes, father." She started the black, now thoroughly subdued and willing to be docile, and rode slowly away.

"Mr. Granton, I've been lookin' for some certain men for quite a spell," Riley said. "I let 'em get away from me once. I won't ever stand right with the ranger force till I get 'em—or see 'em planted."

"I understand, Riley."

"I'm payin' my own expenses till I finish the deal. So I take a job when I've got to have more money. I've got some money now that I saved from my last job—but I might feel like takin' one with you."

"That's splendid! If you'll ride out to the ranch—"

"That is," Riley continued, "maybe. You've got a man named Sam Akers workin' for you, huh?"

"Yes. Akers is an assistant foreman."

"Mind tellin' me how you happened to hire him? I'm askin' this official, a man might say."

"I see. He came to me with good recommendations from a big ranch over in Mexico."

"Yeah, Akers could do that. You didn't happen to check up on the recommendations, did you?"

"No. I put him to work, and he filled the job. He's a fair man at it. A bit brusque with the other men sometimes—but he knows the work."

"This here job Sam Akers has—that's the job I want," Dan Riley decided.

"But Akers has it."

"He has now," Riley said. "He's comin' to Mesaville tonight, I understand—and he might not get back to the ranch. If he don't, I'll come out and take his job."

"But I don't understand, Riley."

"You've got one job and two men," Riley said, smiling faintly. "Come mornin', you'll prob'ly have only one man. Either Sam Akers or me won't be able to climb into a saddle."

"So that's the way of it! No way to avoid it?"

"No way. Sam Akers is one of the men I've been after for quite a spell. He's wanted for murder, bank robbin', horse stealin' and a lot of other things. Been hidin' out over in Mexico for more'n a year."

"What?" Granton cried. "And I made him an assistant foreman! Prove that, Riley, and I'll kick him off the ranch!"

"I don't reckon that'll be necessary—unless I'm gettin' slow on the draw," Riley returned. "I just wanted you to understand the situation, Mr. Granton. When Sam Akers sees me—and I reckon

he knows I'm in town—he'll come shootin'. No chance takin' him in alive. He knows what it'd mean."

"The job is yours, Riley, if you're able to claim it tomorrow."

"Thanks, sir. I aim to make you a good hand. Now, I've got a favor to ask. Do you need a good man to sorter help the cook scrape pots and pans?"

Granton smiled. "Got a pal, have you? Bring him along, and we'll put him to work."

"Esteban, come here!" Riley called.

Esteban rode over to them, acting slightly embarrassed in the presence of the big ranch owner.

"Mr. Granton, this is Don Esteban Marcos Pulido—he says so himself," Riley reported, grinning. "He's the man I'm meanin'—one fine hombre! Esteban, maybe we're both goin' to work for Mr. Granton out on his ranch."

"Work?" Esteban gasped.

"Yeah! It's time you began livin' a useful life. You're goin' to be an assistant cook. That's settled."

It was quite a strain on a new friendship. But Esteban sighed and nodded his assent.

"Anyhow, Señor Dan, it will be much better than punching cattle," he said. "I shall be near the food supply at all times."

CHAPTER IV

Devil's Hirelings

INTO the western sky sank the sun, and scarlet and orange banners flamed through the fleecy clouds.

On the hillside behind the town of Mesaville, a score of men were gathered around a crude grave. Bill Morgan was being laid to rest, without much ceremony.

Down at the corner of the cantina building, Dan Riley and Esteban were watching. Riley felt no compunction. He had killed to preserve his own life. Moreover, the man he had killed had been a cowardly assassin lurking in ambush, shooting from behind a ledge of rock.

But that did not alter the situation. The dead man had friends of his own ilk. And Pete Drake, the gaunt one, was their leader. He was a friend of Sam Akers. So Riley watched and listened, and prepared for trouble.

"They are about to come down the hillside, Señor Dan," Esteban said presently.

"Yeah! If they start anything, you keep out of it."

"Am I not your friend?"

"That don't give you any claim to gettin' yourself filled with hot lead. This here is my own personal fight."

"Would it not be best, Señor Dan, to avoid trouble? You have bigger game in store. Let us walk down by the stable and make sure that our horses are all right."

"You ain't aimin' to tell me that I ought to act like a coward, are you?" Riley asked.

"Everybody knows you are not a coward, señor. You have proved that scores of times. Sometimes it takes courage to walk away."

"You can't dodge trouble, Esteban. A hombre's got to face it and lick it."

Dan Riley stood with his back to the wall, his feet crossed, his arms folded over his chest, smoking a cigarette and watching through narrowed eyes the group descending the hill. Pete Drake, the gaunt one, strode at their head. The men were talking together. No doubt, they had arranged a program.

Inside the cantina, Lopez already had lighted the big kerosene lamps, and the light filtered through doors and windows and mingled with the last flames of the sunset. Dan Riley could be seen easily.

Esteban stood a short distance from him, puffing at a cigarette also, the manner of his puffing betraying the nervous strain under which he was laboring. A thing like this might have been an old story to Dan Riley, but it was a new adventure for Esteban. He was wondering how he happened to be there at all—for he always had been careful to avoid trouble.

The group of men walked at a slower rate as they came to the bottom of the slope and began following a path which led to the cantina. They spread out a little. Though the most of them were armed, none drew a gun. On they came, without speaking, Pete Drake a few feet in front of the others.

"Were you lookin' for me, hombres?" Dan Riley asked the question. That was an old ranger trick, taking the initiative.

They stopped. Drake came on a couple of strides, and stood with arms akimbo.

"We've been thinkin' as how maybe

you didn't give Bill Morgan a fair chance," he said.

"That's sure too bad," Riley commented. "Gents, it ain't pleasant to take human life—but it ain't nice to be shot at, either. Bill Morgan tried to ambush me. Maybe he didn't allow for the wind. Then he popped up his head to see if I'd been hit. Why else should I kill him? I never saw him before."

"We ain't here to listen to any argument," Pete Drake said.

"What are you here for?" Riley demanded.

"We're thinkin' of dealin' with you, Riley."

"Uh-huh! You're goin' to try to succeed where Bill Morgan failed, huh? Same gent goin' to pay the bill?"

"What do you mean by that?" Drake asked.

"You know damned well what I mean, Drake. Bill Morgan didn't have anything against me. We didn't know each other. Somehow, it was learned that I was comin' along the Mesaville trail. And Bill Morgan was sent out to pot me. Now you're all primed to do the same. Who's behind it?"

"I don't know what you mean!"

"I reekon you do," Riley said.

"Let's get him, boys!" Drake cried.

RILEY had been waiting for that. He understood the peculiar psychology of hostile groups and mobs. There is a moment when they may be tamed or turned aside. But, move an instant too soon, or delay a second too long, and the chance is lost.

Now, Dan Riley straightened suddenly, and in some strange fashion his six-gun was out of its holster and ready in his hand, and every man in front of him marveled at the speed of the draw.

"I'm coverin' you, Drake!" he announced, calmly. "So go right ahead and give your boys orders to come and get me."

They stood like statues. Riley calmly puffed at his cigarette a moment, then spoke again.

"So you want to get me for killin' Bill Morgan, do you? Why me? Why not get the man who hired Bill Morgan to go out and try to ambush me. He's the hombre who killed Bill Morgan. Why don't he do his own killin'? He prob'ly knows by this time that I'm in town."

"Who are you talkin' about?" Pete Drake asked.

"You know cussed well who I'm talkin' about. I'd admire to meet him face to face, and where there ain't any rocks to get behind."

"Maybe you'll have the chance," Drake cried. "He's on his way to town now. He's comin' to settle with you, Riley!"

"I'm waitin'," Dan Riley said.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Pete Drake turned aside, and his friends followed him, and they circled around a tree and approached the front door of the cantina, through which they finally passed.

Dan Riley had not moved, except to return his six-gun to its holster when he felt certain that there would be no present hostile move. Esteban slipped through the gathering shadows of the night to his side.

"And what now, *Señor Dan?*" he asked.

"There ain't anything to do but wait. Drake and his friends are passin' it up to Sam Akers now, and he's the man I want."

"And when he comes, señor—?"

"You can't make plans for a thing like this," Riley said. "If you do they never work out. You've just got to wait till somethin' pops, then be sure you've got your eyes open."

Now, Don Esteban Marcos Pulido had been worrying about something for a few hours, and he decided this was the proper time to mention it. To Esteban's way of thinking it was fully as cogent as Riley's possible duel with Sam Akers.

"Regarding that joke about going to work at the Granton ranch, Señor Dan—what was the significance of that?" he asked.

"That wasn't any joke, Esteban. We're goin' to work there tomorrow, if I'm able to be up and around. I'm to have Sam Akers' job, if he ain't able to tend to it himself at that time. And you're goin' to be an assistant to the cook."

"Can it be, señor, that you are serious?"

"You're damned right I'm serious!"

"I cannot understand it," Esteban said. "Why should you take a job punching cattle, when you have money? And why should I—Don Esteban Marcos Pulido—wash pots and pans, and possibly peel potatoes?"

"You ain't scared of work, are you, Esteban?"

"I am not exactly scared of it, señor. But there are many things for which I have a greater admiration."

"Here's the idea, Esteban. Sam Akers' three friends, the men I've been after, are comin' to go to work for Granton. I got that tip to-day."

"Ah! And you wish to be there when they arrive?"

"Yeah! I sure want to be there," Riley said. "Sam Akers is only one on the list. What's he doin' workin' hard on a ranch? And them three bandit friends of his—why do they want to do honest work all of a sudden? Huh? And this man Pete Drake, fussin' around Mesaville, never workin' but always with plenty of money to spend, and him a friend of that gang."

"Señor Dan, as it is often said, a light begins to dawn. I shall peel potatoes and wash pots and pans with pleasure."

"Then that's settled," Riley said, tossing away his smoke. "Now, we'll go into the cantina."

"As you please, señor. I follow where you lead. A man can die but once!"

THE cantina was a sort of romantic place at night, with the huge oil lamps casting flickering shadows over the big room, and giving it a touch of softness. The bar was generally busy, and gambling games were on, and there was a tinpan piano which somebody always was pounding.

Strange patrons visited the place, too—men nobody ever saw by daylight. They came in over the trail, stopped at the cantina of Pablo Lopez to spend a few hours and considerable money, and disappeared into the darkness again. Renegades, wanted men, smugglers, thieves—border rats!

Dan Riley strode into the place with Don Esteban close behind him, and kept near the wall as he made his way toward the rear of the room. His quick eyes found Pete Drake and some of his friends, but they were giving Riley no attention.

They sat at a tiny table, and one of the cantina girls served them with drinks. Carmelita Lopez was beside the piano, singing, while another girl played. Riley squinted his eyes and watched her. This was the girl who had caused his disgrace, caused him to be named "Romance" Riley. The sombrero he wore, with the names carved in the band—that, too, was because of her.

His drink before him on the table untasted, Dan Riley half closed his eyes and considered the past year or so. The land had been laughing at him. Always, following the trail, he had found it blocked. It had got to be a game—keeping Dan Riley away from the men he sought, giving him false information, causing him to ride aimlessly along trails at the end of which he found nothing.

But the hour of triumph for him was near, Riley thought now. He was finally close to the quarry. Sam Akers was coming here tonight. The other three would arrive in a few days, if they did not change their plans. Riley would be face to face with them at last.

It would be a bitter fight, he knew. None of them could afford capture, with ropes waiting for them on one side of the Line and a firing squad on the other. The four were the sort to die with their boots on, and the hard ground their bed.

Somebody stopped beside the table, and Riley glanced up and found Pablo Lopez there.

"Not in my cantina, please, señor!" Lopez begged.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about, Lopez, and I don't believe you do yourself," Riley told him.

"It is being whispered that there is to be a meeting between you and Sam Akers."

"I'm hopin' so," Riley said. "But Akers may not come."

"I happen to know, señor, that one carried word to him, out to the ranch. Akers will come."

LOPEZ went on, to remonstrate with two who were preparing to quarrel. A whiff of perfume assailed Riley's nostrils. Carmelita was beside the table now.

"So it is that you are a hero, eh, señor?" she said, flashing her eyes at him. "The man who hates women—he is 'Romance' Riley again! He rescues a girl on a runaway horse—and then he puts his arm around her. I saw it, with these eyes of mine."

"I'm bettin' you did," Riley said. "She started to faint, and I held her in the saddle."

"Ah! It is an old game, that fainting. Often have I worked it myself, señor."

"It wasn't any game. She was scared half to death," Riley declared.

"See how you defend her! Can it be that she has struck your heart at first sight?"

"There ain't any woman in the world can strike my heart," Dan Riley declared. "I hate 'em all! You—singin' that love song over by the piano! Damned fools strummin' guitars under windows! It's a pot o' mush!"

Carmelita giggled. "I have heard it said that men of your race make great lovers," she told him. "Perhaps it was a mistake?"

"Far as I'm concerned, it is," Riley said. "Whose wine are you puttin' dope in tonight?"

Her face clouded. "Never will you forgive me for that!" she said.

"They buried a man up on the hill at sunset. Charge that up to your joke," Riley told her. "And, before the night is through—"

"Señor Dan!" She was speaking in whispers now. "I have been listening to certain men talk. If this Señor Akers comes, and you have trouble with him, stay away from the open window behind the poker table."

"Why?" Riley demanded.

"It is not pleasant, is it, to be shot in the back?"

"So they're plannin' somethin' like that, huh? I thought Akers had guts enough to play square."

"These men were saying that he desired to do so. But it appears that he is important, for some reason. He cannot die just at this time, for that might upset certain plans."

Riley glanced up at her swiftly. "What are you gettin' at?" he asked.

"Why should I explain it to you, when you will not forgive me?" she countered. Then she was gone toward the piano again, to sing another song.

"Fool woman!" Riley growled. "There ought to be a law agin women!"

"That Señor Drake approaches," Esteban whispered. "I am ready to aid you. I can shoot beneath the table—"

"Don't start anything!" Riley snapped. "They've got men planted all around us. It's not Drake I want to quarrel with."

Drake stopped a few feet away, pretended to be looking around the room, and finally met Riley's eyes.

"I'm still waitin', Drake," Riley said.

"Yeah? You won't have to wait much longer, I reckon. Sam Akers is just tyin' his horse to the hitch rail."

CHAPTER V

Death in the Cantina

SHORT, squat, swarthy, mean of visage and disposition, Sam Akers, despite his long record for crimes and cruelties, was one of the least of the men with whom Dan Riley had to deal. Yet he was an antagonist not to be despised. The man had courage, and could shoot.

He had not come to Mesaville from the Granton ranch alone. Two friends were with him, men of his own ilk. They tethered their ponies to the hitch rail at the side of the building, slapped the dust from their clothes and approached the door. The other two held back and let Sam Akers take the lead.

He hitched up his overalls and chaps, adjusted his gunbelt, swung his six-gun holster around to the position he preferred. A man brushed past him.

"He's at a table in the back of the room, Sam."

"Uh!" Sam Akers grunted his acknowledgment.

Akers waited until a group was passing into the cantina, and went in behind them. He swerved aside and traveled to the head of the bar. He ordered a drink, but allowed it to remain on the bar in front of him untasted.

His narrow, gleaming eyes searched through the room until they found Dan Riley. The latter was leaning back in a chair beside the little table. A cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth. His body seemed relaxed.

But a thing like that would not deceive an experienced rogue like Sam Akers. Riley really was tensed, he knew, ready to go into action. And he knew Dan Riley's reputation in his ranger days—a reputation for possessing nerves of steel, for making quick decisions, keeping a mental balance, for hard riding, swift and accurate shooting.

Sam Akers' eyes narrowed more, and a flush suffused his tanned face. Riley was a menace as long as he lived. And there were plans afoot that Akers and

some others did not want ruined by the presence on the earth of any one man.

Assassination would not have been difficult, when Akers had so many rogue friends about. But Sam Akers wanted the world to believe that he was capable of conquering Dan Riley single-handed, and fairly.

Akers took his drink. His eyes never left Riley at the table across the room. Riley did not seem to be looking at him at all, seemed oblivious of Akers' presence in the cantina—and that did not fool Sam Akers, either.

A thrill of nervousness seemed to run through the room. One by one, the cantina girls crept away. Carmelita Lopez, scorning to show fear, sat down at the piano, and idly ran her fingers over the keys.

Raucous and strident talk died down gradually. Men moved with a nervous snap. Those near the table at which Dan Riley was sitting were quick to get out of the vicinity. Those near Sam Akers at the bar suddenly believed they had business elsewhere.

Akers was trying to decide what sort of move Riley would make, was waiting for it. He did not want to be the aggressor, but neither did he want to be caught off guard. Riley gave no sign, though he looked straight at Akers once.

Sam Akers began to feel a measure of nervousness himself, but fought it off. If it was to be a waiting game, he could play it that way. But he would not wait too long.

Now it was almost dead quiet in the cantina. Poker chips clicked as players handled them, a murmur of voices swept through the room. There were no other sounds. Behind the bar, Lopez was ready to drop to safety if trouble began.

Men sauntered out the front door—and wiped the perspiration from their faces as soon as they emerged into the zone of safety. Each second they expected to hear a blast of gunfire, perhaps the cry of a mortally wounded man.

And then—the tinkling of the old piano, and a girl's voice in song!

CARMELITA LOPEZ wrecked the nervous strain of the cantina. The song grew in volume until it filled the big room. Men began talking loudly again, and moved around. But Dan Riley remained leaning back in his chair, the cigarette dangling from his lips, his appearance that of a man half asleep.

Sam Akers growled a curse and started along the bar. Other men got out of his path, avoided his vicinity. Watching Riley from the corners of his eyes, Akers passed him and continued along the bar.

He turned away, toward the piano. Carmelita was just ending her song. Sam Akers leaned against the end of the piano, so he could talk to her and watch Riley at the same time.

"Hello, sweetheart!" Akers said.

She twisted away from him as he tried to grasp her arm.

"Coy tonight, huh?" Sam Akers spoke in a voice that all in the room could hear, for suddenly it had grown quiet again. "I reckon I understand, Carmelita. An old flame o' yours is here tonight, somebody told me."

"It is my wish, señor, that you do not bother me," Carmelita said. "I have a headache."

"You've just been singin', so it can't ache very bad. I know—you're afraid he'll get jealous o' me. Has he been buyin' any wine tonight?"

Some in the room gasped at that, knowing the story of the drugged wine that had resulted in Dan Riley's professional disgrace. But Riley gave no sign that he had heard. He teetered in his chair, and, always on guard, struck a match and lighted his cigarette again.

"Do you ever hear from Romance Riley these days, Carmelita?" Sam Akers demanded, in a loud voice. "I understand he's right down peeved at you for what you did. He was chasin' four naughty hombres, and forgot what he was doin'."

Nor did that thrust bring any response from Dan Riley. He took the cigarette from his mouth, while all in the place watched him—and yawned.

Sam Akers growled a curse. Carmelita got up and started away from the piano, and Akers let her go. Riley had yawned! The red badge of rage decorated Akers' face again.

He hitched up his belt and left the piano, starting on a course that would carry him past Riley's table. Men moved swiftly out of the way again, got out of every possible line of fire.

At the table, Riley, from the corner of his mouth, and with scarcely any movement of his lips, spoke to Esteban: "Get goin'!"

"But, señor—"Esteban protested.

"Get away! Else maybe we won't either of us work for the Granton ranch."

Don Esteban got out of his chair slowly and turned aside, being very particular not to hurry about it. He wanted to remain, but he was a man to obey orders. And he judged that Dan Riley knew what he was about.

Riley did not shift his position, apparently, but his right hand dropped down to his waist, and he hooked his thumb into his belt. Sam Akers saw that slight move and knew its significance. Riley was on guard, strictly so. He could snap his six-gun out of its holster as readily as Akers could get out his own weapon.

But Akers had started this, and the eyes of all in the room were upon him. He could not turn back now, or his prestige would be gone forever. He walked slowly and deliberately toward the table, his boots thumping the floor with a hollow sound.

A few feet from the table, he stopped. Dan Riley was regarding him from the corners of his eyes.

"I understand you've been lookin' for me, Riley," Sam Akers said.

"Yeah! I've been lookin' for you for quite awhile," Riley replied. "Down in Mexico for a spell, wasn't you—playin' bandit?"

"And what did you want me for?" Akers demanded.

"Me? Three murders and about a score of stealin's."

"Well, here I am!"

"So I see," said Riley. "A little heavier. Must be gettin' good, regular eats."

"I can't say you've been improvin' any," Akers sneered. "Well, what are you goin' to do about it, Riley?"

"About what?"

"You've been lookin' for me, and here I am."

"I'll take care of you when I get around to it," Riley said. "There ain't any rush—now that I know where you are. And you've got some friends comin' soon, I understand."

"If it's a waitin' game you're playin', I can match you at it, Riley. My nerves are as good as yours."

"We'll see, Akers."

SAM AKERS' blood was boiling. He felt that Riley was getting the best of this encounter, and that infuriated him. He felt an urge to go for his six-gun and have a decision. But something seemed to hold his hand. He sensed that such a move would mean his instant death.

"After lookin' so long and so hard for me, you don't seem to be any too damned excited about findin' me," Akers said. "Maybe you've changed your mind about what you were goin' to do, huh?"

"Not any!" Riley said.

"I reckon it'd be safe if I turned my back on you and walked to the bar."

"Sure!" Riley replied. "I ain't any Bill Morgan. I don't do my shootin' from ambush—and I don't hire out my gun."

"What are you meanin' to insinuate, Riley?"

Riley eyed him squarely. "I'm meanin' to say that the old sayin' is correct—if you want somethin' done right, do it yourself."

Sam Akers' eyes grew narrow and blazed. He thrust out his chin. His hands became fists at his sides. He fought to regain control of himself. Enraged, and with Dan Riley as cold as ice, Akers knew he would be at a terrible disadvantage.

"I ain't goin' to stand here gassin' with you all night," Akers said finally. "I heard you were so damned eager to see me that you'd been trailin' me all over. And here I am, and you ain't doin' anything about it."

"I'll get around to that," Riley told him.

Sam Akers glared at him a moment—and then deliberately turned his back. Slowly, he started across the big room toward the bar, his hands swinging at his sides. And suddenly he stopped, lurched to one side, and whirled. His six-gun came from its holster.

"Damn you, Riley—!"

Two guns barked, a fraction of a second between them. Sam Akers lurched again and swayed forward, half turned, and crashed to the floor. Dan Riley was still sitting in the chair at the table, with the cigarette still dangling from the corner of his mouth.

"I knew he was goin' to try that," Riley said. "I was watchin' his face in the mirror on the back bar across the room."

Now that it was over, Riley got to his feet, while some of those in the cantina rushed to the fallen Sam Akers. Riley beckoned to Esteban, who hurried to him.

"Do me a favor, Esteban?" Riley asked.

"At any time, señor!"

"Go to the barn and get that runnin' iron out of my stuff. I want to heat it up, and burn a name off my leather hat band."

CHAPTER VI

Gunsmoke Trail

DON ESTEBAN MARCOS PULIDO, now that Sam Akers had been removed, came to the realization that, for the first time in his life, he was to hold down a job. The thing was a distinct shock. There was a brief moment when he had the idea of telling Dan Riley that their bond of friendship must be severed, that he would face perils with his new friend, stand at his back in combat, starve him and face the rigors of the climate with him—but would not work for him or anybody else.

But Don Esteban thought better of it soon. He was a fatalist—and what was to be would be. Moreover, he had honor of a sort and was not without courage. Explorers had gone into strange countries and lived to tell the tale, and so would he.

But there was a certain amount of reaction. Don Esteban found friends, and sang for them, in return for which singing he received gratis certain strong liquors which loosened his tongue. He pitied his lot to the extent of telling about it. He did not tell much, but it was enough. He related that Dan Riley was going to work for the Granton ranch, and that he, Don Esteban Marcos Pulido, was going with him, and that they would ride out in the morning.

Plenty of people heard the yarn, and it was relayed to others. And, after a time, it came to the ears of Pete Drake, who called some others into a conference. After that, Drake and his friends kept away from Riley, offered him no affront, did not even favor him with a glare.

More men came into the cantina off the trail, men who often glanced behind furtively. Business increased. Riley tired of the din, and decided that he would get some sleep. He said as much to Esteban, for whom he had arranged for accommodations.

He left the cantina and went out into the patio, which now was flooded with moonlight, and walked along beneath the arches toward the room which had been assigned to him by Lopez. He was cautious and alert, as always, though he did not anticipate an attack at this time.

Riley turned in. He did not use the cot, but left a roll of blankets upon it to resemble a sleeping man, and took more blankets and made himself a pallet in a corner of the little room. But he could have used the cot. For, when the first streak of dawn found him awake, nothing had happened to mar his slumber.

He bathed face and hands in the pool in the patio, went into the cantina, and ordered something to eat. Don Esteban appeared a moment later, having breakfasted at the hut of a friend. He had the horses ready for the trail. So, just as the sun was peeping up over the hills to the east, they started out, turning into the north trail and going along at an easy pace that would eat up the miles.

They took deep draughts of the bracing air and watched the buzzards wheel a cloudless sky as they looked for their morning meal. Long before they came to the ranch, they knew, the black heat waves would be dancing, and the merciless sun would be broiling them.

They came to the top of a hill where the trail was only gravel and sand and the footing treacherous, and allowed their mounts to make their own way.

"Broken country from here on, señor," Esteban said.

"Yeah? Valley on the other side, huh?"

"*Si, señor!* The headquarters ranch house is but a short distance from this end of the valley. Two hours, say, and we shall be there. And then—the pots and pans!"

"Broken country," Riley said. "Ambush country!"

"You are expecting trouble, Señor Dan?"

"I'm always expectin' trouble, and I generally find it."

"Those other three—possibly they have not yet arrived."

"I reckon not," Riley said. "They'll be driftin' in. I don't think the death of Akers will keep 'em from comin' to the ranch. There's somethin' goin' on behind

all this, and I don't think Akers' death'll stop it."

"And what am I to do, señor, at the ranch, in addition to my work in the kitchen?"

"Just keep your eyes and ears open, Esteban. I'll be livin' in the bunkhouse, and you'll prob'ly do the same. We'll get plenty chances to talk. This season of the year, the men'll be scattered out on the range a lot, comin' and goin'."

"Making more chances for ambush, señor?"

"Yeah! It'll be no time for me to go ridin' against the skyline, I reckon."

IN the shade cast by a jumble of rocks, they stopped to let their mounts rest, and to smoke before continuing the journey. Their cigarettes finished, they put up their neckcloths and started on.

Suddenly, they were on a flat again, save that here and there were little rocky buttes half covered with dry grass and weeds. As they rode out a rifle cracked, and a bullet sang past within inches of Dan Riley's head.

"Knew it!" Riley barked.

He swerved his horse abruptly, as another shot came and another bullet almost struck him. Esteban had swerved his horse also. Now they used the spurs and dashed forward, and turned to look back.

Up in that last jumble of rocks, a tiny wisp of smoke betrayed the location of their foe.

"Let's go get that hombre," Riley suggested, as he pulled up his horse and Esteban stopped beside him. "That was a rifle he used—could tell by the bark."

"And we have nothing but six-guns, señor."

"Yeah, we have somethin' else—we've got guts. Me, I'm tired of bein' shot at from behind rocks. It's time to do somethin' about it."

They rode in zigzag fashion, now with speed and now slowly, rode behind hummocks and rocks, did everything possible to disconcert the aim of the enemy. Another shot came, but not even near enough to cause them a feeling of discomfort.

Now Riley grew cautious, and Esteban fell back behind him. No more bullets had been sent toward them. Either the enemy had decided to ride for it, else was waiting for them to come within better range, and Riley somehow believed the latter.

They rode out of a depression, their intention being to make for a hillock, get behind it and circle it, and so come to a place from which they could make a rush at their man. But as they emerged Esteban gave a shout, and Riley turned quickly to look.

From two directions, mounted men were bearing down upon them, shooting as they came. And the foe up in the rocks opened up with the rifle again.

"It's a trap!" Riley cried at Esteban. "Follow me!"

Riley turned his horse and began racing across the rough, uneven ground, risking the danger of the horse stumbling and himself being thrown. Esteban followed him, only turning once to fire a single shot at those who pursued.

Riley was leading the way toward a tiny butte studded with rocks, elevated some twenty feet above the surrounding country. There were three men pursuing, and now the one who had been using the rifle also came into view, mounted, to join the pursuit.

Four to two, and no chance to run for it, even had Dan Riley wished to do so. Neither Riley's horse nor Esteban's was noted for excessive speed; the mounts of their pursuers probably were as good. And they were still some three or four miles from the Granton ranch house.

Around the shoulder of the little butte, Riley led the way. He jerked his horse to a skidding stop, and Esteban, watching for just that, followed his example. They sprang out of the saddles, trailed the reins, began climbing.

Before they reached the top and found barricade behind the rocks, they could hear the thundering hoofs of the horses their pursuers rode. Riley dropped behind a rock and got out his six-gun. He put a bullet past the head of the leading horseman, and the three stopped their headlong rush and scattered. The fourth man had not caught up with them, but was approaching rapidly.

Riley fired again, and missed. Beside him, Esteban flattened himself on the hard earth and tossed his sombrero aside. He examined his six-gun methodically and prepared for battle.

"They're huntin' cover," Riley said.

THE three had dismounted, trailed their reins, and were getting behind rocks and clumps of brush. The fourth man came up to them, shouted something Riley and Esteban could not catch, and circled toward the left.

"Four of them—they flatter us, señor."

"That Pete Drake is one of 'em," Riley said. "He was hooked up with Sam Akers, all right. Hooked up with some others, too, I'm thinkin'. Have to see about it, when we get out of this."

Bullets began peppering the rocks, ricocheting, singing off across the country. Riley risked a quick reconnaissance, He could spot three of the men easily by smoke from their guns, but did not see the fourth. A bullet sang past his head, and he dropped down behind the rock.

Then he crawled to the other side, and risked a look there. Esteban heard him fire twice, rapidly, heard also a muttered imprecation.

"What is it, Señor Dan?" Esteban asked.

"That fourth skunk was tryin' to get our horses and set us on the ground."

"Did you get him, señor?"

"Nothin' serious. Hit him, though. Saw him reel in his saddle and clutch his left shoulder. Chased him away, anyhow. He's makin' for the others."

Riley risked another look, emptied his gun, then dodged down behind the rock to reload, while the enemy expended ammunition recklessly. Esteban crawled to the other side and peered down at the horses.

"If somebody would only come along the trail and hear the battle—" he began.

"Prob'ly pay no attention to it, if they did," Riley told him. "Wind's blowin' the wrong way to carry the sounds. Puffs of smoke 'd look like swirls of dust."

"You are very discouraging," Esteban complained.

"I warned you not to come playin' partner around me, didn't I? Told you there'd be fireworks and trouble."

"It is worth it, señor, to be your friend."

Another fusillade came from the enemy, and bullets splattered around the rocks. Riley put up his head quickly, in time to see three of the four rushing forward after they had fired, seeking new cover nearer the base of the butte. He emptied his six-gun.

"Nicked one of 'em," he said, as he reloaded. "That makes two o' the four nicked. But they can still shoot."

He crawled to a new position and took a look. There might be a chance to get at the horses, but it would be running a risk to try it. He put it up to Esteban.

"Want to try to ride for it?"

"It is better than remaining here," Esteban said.

"Get ready, then. Wait till they send another volley at us, and we'll crack back at 'em, then make a dash. And I sure hope luck's with us!"

The volley came as he finished speaking, and they lifted their heads to find two of their foes changing position again. A third was some distance back, probably the wounded one. The fourth was still a greater distance away.

"Now's the time!" Riley said.

They sprang down from the rocks, fell and scrambled, rolled through the dust and across the rough gravel. At the base of the butte, they bent low and raced for their mounts.

Guns cracked and flamed as their retreat was discovered. But they caught up their mounts and swung up into their saddles. Straight away from the butte they raced, toward a depression which would give them some cover.

Two of their foes mounted and followed, riding near together. A third came along behind. The fourth did not pursue.

RILEY glanced back, and saw that Pete Drake was one of the two nearest. If the third man could be distanced, and the odds thus made even, it would be possible to turn and fight it out. Something like that was in Riley's mind. He did not like this running away.

Esteban was riding parallel with him, following Riley's leadership as to direction. Those behind were firing frequently, in the hope, possibly, of scoring a lucky hit.

Riley waved toward what seemed to be a trail running toward the distant ranch house. Esteban turned toward it with him. They jumped a gully, turned into the trail, and raced on.

And then disaster came, at a moment when Riley was hoping for a chance to stop and put up a fight, now that the third man was far behind.

He saw Esteban's horse stumble, stagger, reel, fall. Esteban shot over his head to strike with force against the hard ground. Riley pulled up his mount, swerved, rode off to one side. His six-gun came out, and he opened fire.

In the face of his fire, the two pursuers, Drake and another man, pulled up their horses also, and tried to find cover. But there was scant cover beside the trail. Riley urged his horse to speed, rode like a fiend back to where Esteban had fallen, where his horse was trying to struggle to his feet.

A bullet sent Riley's sombrero flying from his head. He fired in reply, but missed. The third rider, he saw, was coming up and soon would be able to join in the fight.

Riley had no delusion about what was happening. These men were out to kill him, because he was a menace to their plans. They had failed the day before, had failed a short time ago at the mouth of the little pass. And so eager were they to accomplish their work that they had followed this near the Granton ranch house, with men working out on the range.

He skidded his horse to a stop beside Esteban, who was getting to his feet. Esteban's horse did not have a broken leg, as Riley had feared, but he was no good now as a mount. He limped away from the trail.

"Up behind me!" Riley barked, as he fired again at the man nearest.

"Ride and leave me, señor! They will not harm—"

"Up!" Riley commanded.

He fired again, wheeled his horse, made it possible for Esteban to mount on the side away from the enemy. But Esteban swayed and tottered, and let go of the saddle. He was still half dazed from his fall.

Drake and the other man were circling, starting to ride forward. Riley knew their intention—to get close enough to make sure of their work. He snapped shots at both of them, failed to score a hit.

Esteban had tottered away, and had dropped to the ground to sit holding his head in his hands. Riley could not remain there inactive, a target for three guns. And he did not want to ride away and leave Esteban.

It was a problem—but it was solved. Down the trail from the opposite direction roared the thunder of pounding hoofs.

CHAPTER VII

Mystery Ranch

HIS first glance revealed to Dan Riley a huge black horse charging along like some wild monster bent on destruction. Riding him was the girl he had seen the day before in Mesaville—Betty Granton. Behind her raced three cowpunchers.

Drake and his companions turned and made a run for it. The Granton cowboys shrieked a challenge and started in pursuit. Betty Granton stopped the big black as soon as possible, turned and came back.

Riley had dismounted and hurried to Esteban's side. But Esteban was not injured beyond the shock of the fall. He got to his feet, shaking his head, as the girl came up.

"If you'll take care of him, miss, I'll be chasin' them critters," Riley said.

"The boys are giving them the run, Riley," she replied. "You're not needed. What happened?"

"Four men jumped us back at the pass—ambushed us. We had to make a fight. Then we tried to get to the ranch, but Esteban's horse fell."

"Know the men?" she asked.

"I know one of 'em by name. Didn't get a chance to see the others very well."

"Which man did you recognize?"

"You wouldn't know him, I reckon. He hangs around Mesaville a lot, I understand. I'll tend to him later."

"I've a reason for asking you that man's name, Riley. Was he Pete Drake?"

"You seem to know," Riley said.

"I thought as much." A serious look came into her face. She turned to look at the fleeing men. The Granton cowpunchers were getting a lot of fun out of the chase. They were emptying their six-guns at the fugitives, probably with no expectation of hitting the target under those conditions. But they gave speed to the flight.

"Let's be getting home," she said. "What's your friend's name?"

Riley grinned. "He's Don Esteban Marcos Pulido."

"Don Esteban can get on his own horse and come along slowly. The boys will pick him up."

"Maybe I'd better wait and come along with him," Riley said in sudden panic. He was commencing to be afraid of this girl.

"Nonsense! I want to talk to you."

Riley mounted as Esteban got into his own saddle, having ascertained that his mount had suffered nothing more than a sprained leg. Betty Granton started slowly along the trail, then stopped and waited for Riley to catch up with her.

"I feel that I can trust you, Riley," she said. "I've heard a lot about you—know your story. You needn't blush! You'll square everything by getting your men, I'm sure. Got Sam Akers in town last night, didn't you?"

"Yes'm. It was a case of that or him get me."

She glanced at his hat, which he had recovered and now was wearing.

"One name burned off," she said. "And there are three more."

"When they've been burned off, I'll get me a new hat band."

"Know where those three men are, Riley?"

"Not right at this minute, miss."

"Don't call me 'miss'. Call me Betty. All the punchers do. So you don't know where they are at this minute. But you think you'll be running across them soon, don't you?"

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised."

"Don't you really happen to know that they're coming here to work for dad?"

"Well, I heard that," Riley confessed.

"They are. I happen to know. Bully Bancord and Hank Whalen, as they're known, will be here tomorrow or the next day. And the other, the one they call 'Dude' Lachmer, will arrive in about a week."

"It seems right down funny to me that them hombres would want to work at honest jobs," Riley said. "I know a lot about 'em, and I can't understand it."

"Possibly I can explain it to you—later," she said.

"I'd sure admire to have it explained."

"Can I trust you, Riley?"

"I reckon."

"There's something going on, and it's got my dad worried. Whatever it is, I think he got into it without knowing. He thought that Sam Akers was all right. And these other three—"

"That's easy," Riley said, as she hesitated. "All your father's got to do is say he don't want 'em to work—and leave the rest to me. They're all wanted men. I've got a right to arrest 'em and take 'em in—or the other thing, if they resist."

"We'll talk about it later," she said.

THEN they rode for a time in silence. She did not seem to wish to continue the conversation, and Riley was glad. He was looking over the home ranch, inspecting the buildings and fences and general equipment.

Riley knew ranches, and his eyes glowed as he looked at this layout owned by a big corporation. You could do things with money!

"Who's the foreman?" he asked abruptly.

"Bill Kline," she replied, smiling at him. "He's really a sort of superintendent, and has several assistant foremen under him. You're to be one, aren't you?"

"That's the plan," Riley said. "Where'll I find this Mr. Kline? I'll have to report that I'm ready for work—Esteban, too."

"There's a special little building for his office," she said. "I'll show you when we get there."

Now they came to a shady lane and went along it at an easy lope. Riley was admiring the big black she was riding, and he remembered something.

"I'm right down sorry for what I said yesterday—that you didn't know how to handle horses," he said.

"It's all right, Riley. Didn't look like I did, yesterday, did it?"

Riley grinned. "Oh, I've had 'em bolt with me, too," he said. "Any horse is liable to get a crazy spell. Horses are like wo—"

"Go on and say it, Riley. Horses are like women that way—liable to get crazy spells. You certainly don't like women. Possibly, some day, one will make you change your mind."

"If one ever does," Dan Riley said, "she'll have to be a humdinger!"

They were approaching the big ranch house, which was no less than a mansion. Betty Granton pointed off to the left.

"That little building with the two trees in front of it," she said, "is the office. You'll find Mr. Kline there, probably."

"Thanks! I'll find him. Esteban will be comin' along pretty quick."

The girl wheeled her horse and rode toward the veranda steps of the big house, and Riley went toward the office. He dismounted and tied his horse, and went up to the door and knocked.

"Come in!" a gruff voice called.

Hat in hand, Riley opened the door and entered. He found a large room filled with desks and filing cabinets, and a man sitting behind the biggest desk chewing an unlighted cigar. Hard as granite, that man, Riley decided.

"I'm lookin' for Mr. Kline," Riley said.

"I'm Kline."

"My name's Riley. Mr. Granton told me to report for work today, me and my friend, Esteban—"

"Yes, I know." Kline took the cigar from his mouth and got up. He was a massive man. "But Mr. Granton's changed his mind."

"How's that?"

"There's nothing here for you, Riley. Sorry! You and your friend can ride back to Mesaville."

Dan Riley was so used to meeting the unexpected that it seldom shocked him. In his life, an emergency always had been just around the corner. But this was something of a blow.

"I don't understand," Riley said. "Mr. Granton told me—"

"I know," Kline interrupted. "But there are swift changes often in the affairs of a big company."

"I reckon a small man like me in an assistant foreman's job wouldn't mix up much in company business."

"There's no argument, Riley."

"I ain't tryin' to argue, Mr. Kline. I'm just sayin' that it's funny. I ride out here with my friend, Esteban, to take jobs, and you say there ain't any for us. It's a long way to Mesaville, and we had a little brush with some hombres, and Esteban's horse is hurt so he can't travel fast."

Riley thought that he saw Kline's eyes glow at that statement, but could not be sure.

"Sorry about the horse," Kline said.

"Well, if there ain't jobs, there ain't. Funny thing is that I told Mr. Granton I wasn't right down particular whether I took a job or not, and he seemed right tickled when I said I would."

"Changed his mind," said Kline.

"Could I maybe see Mr. Granton?"

"Afraid not. He's quite busy at the house."

"Uh-huh! How about Esteban leavin' his horse here and usin' a ranch horse to get to town?"

"We don't let strangers have our horses. Blooded stock and all that."

"Yeah? Esteban's horse is a good one, and he's a good rider. You ain't got any objections, I reckon, if we go to the cook shack and get us a little snack."

"We're not running a hotel here, Riley," Kline told him. "You and your friend better get back to Mesaville."

RILEY'S eyes grew narrow, and his face flushed beneath its protecting coat of tan. No ranch he ever had known refused to feed visitors. Hospitality was always extended. The loan of a horse would not have been refused anywhere else, as far as Riley knew.

But he remembered that this huge affair was operated by a wealthy syndicate, and that they ran on a strictly business basis. The operating agents were not Westerners with the Western spirit.

He backed out through the door and put on his hat. Untying his horse, he got into the saddle, taking his sweet time about it. He had a glimpse of Kline's face at the window as he swung his horse around and started toward the lane.

A sweet bunch of mystery around this outfit, Dan Riley told himself. Hiring outlaws for assistant foremen, and the girl hinting at trouble, and a superintendent acting in a manner almost inhuman!

But the only thing that worried him was the long trip back to Mesaville, and Esteban with an injured horse. Riley came to the lane and turned down it toward the distant gate. He saw Esteban coming with a couple of the Granton cowboys, and spurred to meet him.

"Want to see you, Esteban," Riley said, having saluted the others.

They rode on, and Esteban stopped.

"How's your horse?"

"He must have tripped, señor, and sprained his leg," Esteban said. "A little rest, and he will be as well as ever. In a pasture, or even a corral where there are not too many other horses—"

"Think he can stand the trip back to Mesaville?"

"Back to Mesaville?" Esteban gasped. "But I thought we had come out here to work. Have you a new insane idea now, Señor Dan? Is it not enough for one day that we ride and fight and get thrown, always with a vision of greasy pots and pans before the eyes?"

"Yeah? You can damned well get that vision out of your eyes," Riley told him. "Even before we start work, we're fired." Then he related what had taken place between him and the ranch superintendent.

"The horse can make the journey, Señor Dan, but it will have to be a slow one," Don Esteban said finally.

"That'll be nice, with the sun blazin' down as it is. Can't be helped, I reckon."

They went through the gate and started along the dusty road beneath the blistering sun, their hats pulled down to shield their eyes, and their neckcloths pulled up so high that they almost met the hats.

They could not travel faster than a walk. Don Esteban's horse limped badly, and should not have been ridden at all. The fine dust swirled around them on the hot wind, and the relentless sun burned them.

Riley was trying to analyze the situation— and the man Kline. He was commencing to gather some vague ideas regarding the situation. But he told himself that his principal interest in life was to sear the remaining three names off his leather hat band, and that he should think of nothing else.

Bancord! Whalen! Lachmer!

Bully Bancord was all that his name implied, a devotee of all iniquities. He was about fifty, and at least forty of those years had been spent in criminal pursuits. As a boy, he had helped rustle cattle, and at seventeen had slain his first man.

Hank Whalen was tall and thin and noted for his cruelty. He was cold-blooded and steel-nerved, the type to blast a path through life with a six-gun.

And Dude Lachmer! There was a rogue! About twenty-eight, tall and handsome, given to fine raiment and fancy boots. But, at his age, he had as many crimes chalked up against him as the others. And he was the worst type— in the game for the excitement as well as the gain.

Riley glanced at Esteban, who had slouched to one side of the saddle and appeared about half asleep. At the rate they were traveling, it would take the remainder of the day to get to Mesaville —if they got there at all.

Presently, they came to a place where rocks flanked a curve and cast some shade, and where there was protection from wind, dust and sun. They stopped and dropped their neckcloths, took swigs of warm water from their canteens, made cigarettes and lighted them, and relaxed for a moment. The horses needed a breathing spell, too.

Riley got down and examined Esteban's horse. It was a bad sprain, he decided, and it would be criminal to make the animal travel fast for even a short distance. His own mount could carry double, but not all the way to Mesaville, and certainly not if they were trying to race with enemies.

"Señor Dan, you seem troubled," Esteban said.

"Don't like the looks of things. You ain't got any business runnin' around with me, Esteban. There you were, a happy cuss wanderin' around and visitin', and singin' for your meals and drink and never in any trouble. Then you hook up with me. It ain't you these hombres are after. Stay away from me, and you'll stay away from a mess of grief."

"Grief is pleasure when shared with a friend, señor."

Riley grinned. "All right, hombre! Stick! We'll battle our way through no matter what happens."

"Somebody," Esteban observed suddenly, "is coming in a hurry!"

CHAPTER VIII

Bullet Dodger

AROUND the curve dashed the big black, with Betty Granton in the saddle. She was upon them, past them in a flash, then was fighting to bring the horse under control and stop him, for he had been running free.

She disappeared in a cloud of dust, but just as Riley and Esteban were preparing to take after her, they saw her coming back. So they waited in the shade beneath the ledge.

"Oh, I'm so glad I overtook you!" she cried.

Her face showed that she recently had indulged in a fit of anger, and that she was not quite over it yet.

"Any trouble?" Riley asked. "You sure were goin'. That black is a great horse."

"And where were you and your friend, Esteban, going?" she asked.

"Back to Mesaville, I reckon."

"Why? I thought you were going to work for dad."

"So did we," Riley told her. "I reported to that Mr. Kline."

"And what was it he said that made you mad, so you wouldn't take the job?"

"What's that?" Riley cried.

"Kline told dad that you got mad about something, and wouldn't take the job. Said you seemed to think you'd ought to live at the ranch house and eat with the family, and not do any work."

"Yeah? Some day, somewhere, I aim to meet up with Mr. Kline," Riley declared.

"Just as I thought! He lied when he told dad all that stuff, didn't he?"

"He sure and certain did. I reported, like I said, and he said your dad had changed his mind, and that there wasn't any work for Esteban and me. I knew they were hirin' good men wherever they could find 'em, bein' short-handed, so I figured maybe me and Esteban ain't good men."

"What else happened?" Betty demanded.

"Nothin' else could. He said there wasn't any jobs for us, and that settled it, him bein' the foreman. Then I asked could Esteban trade horses, account his bein' hurt, and he said they didn't let everybody have their horses."

"Oh, the beast! And that poor horse scarcely able to walk!"

"Please, Miss Granton, what happened?" Riley wanted to know.

"I don't know myself. I found that you'd started back, and Kline told dad that you got mad and wouldn't take the jobs. So I rode after you, to give you a piece of my mind. I'd hinted to you about some things, Riley—"

"The name's Dan."

"All right, Dan. And I thought it was funny you'd go away like that, without saying a word to me. I—I was hoping that you'd help me."

"I'll help you any time I can, sure. What's behind it?" Riley asked.

She glanced toward Esteban.

"Oh, Esteban's all right," said Riley.

"There's some sort of trouble now between dad and Kline, I think. Kline isn't just an ordinary foreman or superintendent—he represents some of the syndicate's stockholders. So dad is compelled to listen to him."

"Can't just fire him and kick him out?"

"No." She smiled a bit. "I want you to come back."

"That'd be ridin' right into trouble and fuss," Riley explained. "For some reason, Kline don't want me to work there. It's all right with me. I ain't crazy about takin' a job just now—got somethin' else to do."

"Nor I!" said Esteban. He drew himself up in his saddle. "Because his friend wished it, Don Esteban Marcos Pulido was prepared to wash pots and pans, and even peel potatoes. But his heart will not break if that is denied him, and he be allowed to return to Mesaville and loiter around the cantina."

"I wish you'd come back—Dan."

"Then I'd be the center of trouble. Everybody'd be watchin' me, and I couldn't help you, maybe. Understand?" Riley asked. "Some things you hinted at hook up with some things I know. Maybe I can get better results by hangin' around Mesaville."

"Then I'll keep in touch with you," she said. "If I need you, I'll send one of the boys I can trust with a note. He'll find you if you're in town."

"That'll be fine!" Riley said. "I'll be around somewhere. I've got to keep my eyes on a few hombres."

"The ones we talked about?"

"Yeah!"

"And I'll try to let you know if they come to the ranch without passing through Mesaville first," she said.

Then she touched the black with her tiny spurs, and was away in a cloud of dust, dashing back toward the ranch.

"There goes the sort of señorita," said Esteban, "that love songs are written about."

"Oh, she's all right—for a woman," Riley observed. "You'd better get your mind off that love song mush and put it on somethin' we're liable to run into. It's a long way to Mesaville."

THEY rode out under the hot sun and followed the winding trail. Mile after mile, with their mounts walking, they endured the heat and the dust. At times, Riley had Esteban get up beside him, and they led the latter's mount.

Then they came to another bunch of rocks, where there was a little shade, and stopped to rest and recuperate. Tobacco and papers came out, after faces had been mopped and swigs taken from the canteens.

"I've been wonderin'," Riley said, as he rolled his cigarette, "whether we might run into some hostile hombres when we come to that little pass."

"Ah, señor! I, too, have been wondering," Esteban replied. "As I told you when first we met, I have a knowledge of this country. Let us not inquire how I got it. I was a young man once, and liked to roam the hills."

"You damned well mean you had to hide out from a posse," Riley told him, "but no matter."

"And it has just occurred to me, señor, that I know a way to Mesaville which does not run through the pass. If enemies are waiting there, we can turn from this trail before they see us."

"That sounds mighty fine, Esteban."

So, when they started out again, Esteban led the way, and they departed from the main trail and went down into a coulee, and from that to a dry watercourse, which they followed on its curving way to the hills.

Then Esteban led the way into the hills, following a narrow path. Here there was some shade, and grass that was not burned, and finally Esteban called a halt, dropped his neckcloth, waited until Riley had done the same—and smiled.

"Señor Dan," he asked, "how would you like a drink of icy cold water, and to fill your canteen with the same?"

"The heat's gone to your head," Riley said.

"Let us see!"

They dismounted and trailed the reins, and let the horses nibble at the half-green grass. Esteban led the way back through the rocks to a cold spring, where they drank and filled the canteens. The horses could not reach the spring, but they carried water to them in their hats, and also some with which to bathe the leg Esteban's horse had sprained.

"Now we can proceed with some comfort," Esteban said.

"We're goin' a long way around, seems to me."

"There is not the difference of a mile," Esteban assured him. "Around the shoulder of the next hill, we can see Mesaville."

They came to the town an hour and a half later, approaching from the south instead of the north, and put up their horses in Lopez's stable. Esteban attended to the sprain as well as he could.

Then they engaged the same rooms they had the night before, and went outside to sit against the wall of the building and smoke and talk, and rest.

It was just before sunset when two horsemen came riding at a leisurely rate of speed down the north trail and toward the cantina. Riley shifted his holster, so the gun would be handy. Esteban took precautions also.

The riders neared the hitch rail, and one of them observed the pair and whispered to the other. The second looked at them, and muttered curses.

"Howdy, Drake!" Dan Riley called. "You look all worn out. Must have been out in the sun all day. Watchin' the pass, maybe, huh?"

NIGHT came, and the cantina once more became a scene of activity. Men came in off the south trail. Frequently, a heavy vehicle lumbered by. Horses squealed and kicked at the hitch rails.

Dan Riley walked around and listened to the gossip, though pretending not to do so. Esteban always was near, prepared to give aid if trouble broke out.

Finally, Riley sat in a corner near the piano, while the cantina girls were dancing and singing, and Esteban, feeling that his friend was safe with his back against a wall, drifted to the bar to talk to a man he knew.

Carmelita Lopez slipped quietly along the wall and stood beside Riley. He got a whiff of perfume, and glanced up at her, to meet a dimpling smile and flashing eyes.

She bent forward so she could whisper: "Order wine, that I may serve it and drink with you. We must talk."

Riley glanced at her swiftly, and caught an expression of seriousness in her face. "Sure!" he said.

She hurried away, her high heels tap-tapping the cantina floor, her head tossed proudly, her skirts swishing from side to side with the swing of her hips. Carmelita was a beauty—and she knew it. Soon she was back with the wine and glasses on a tray, and sat down beside Riley as she served it.

"What's troublin' you, if anything?" Riley asked.

"Pretend to be interested, to flirt—smile and laugh," she whispered. "Nobody must dream that I ever give you information. I overhear a lot, Señor Dan. But, if they ever suspect me of telling, they will begin to speak carefully in my presence, then I never shall learn anything."

"I get it!" Riley said. He laughed a little, as though at something amusing she had told him.

"Bully Bancord and Hank Whalen passed through the village of Quebrada this morning," she said. "They were riding good horses. They had packs with them, light ones. They stopped at Quebrada only for a time at the cantina, and then took to the trail again."

"Light packs won't slow 'em up. It means they'll sleep out tonight, maybe in a dry camp, and come right on. And they'll be here to-morrow."

"*Si, señor.* They gave out that they were coming here to meet Sam Akers, and that— the expression is Americaño, but I believe I remember it—that they had something soft."

"You've got it, all right," Riley said, and this time he did not have to pretend to be laughing. "So Bancord and Whalen are travelin' together. A couple of hard hombres! Ever hear anything about Dude Lachmer?"

"Only a rumor, señor, that he is to join the others soon. He is at present down in Mexico. They say he is a colonel in the army."

"His own army, maybe," Riley said, laughing again. "Thanks, Carmelita! You're sure a help."

"I am trying to atone, señor, for the wrong I did you."

"You ain't a bad girl at all," he said. "You like me a little, Señor Dan?"

"Don't commence that now!" Riley warned.

"There is something else, too," she said. "It might be wise for you to beware of Señor Pete Drake."

"Don't worry. I've got my eyes on him."

"It seems that he and some of his friends have been away all day. One returned with a bullet in his shoulder, and another had been scratched on the wrist. And Señor Drake is very angry about something that did not happen."

"I'm bettin'!" Riley said. "If it'd happened, I wouldn't be here listenin' to you, maybe."

She left him then, and went back to the piano to sing.

HALF an hour later Riley and Esteban went out into the moonlight, and walked down toward the stable, as though to get their horses. In the darkness against the stable wall, they watched.

A man slipped furtively from the shadows and hurried to the cantina, and through a window they could see him say something to Pete Drake. The latter appeared to grow excited. He emerged from the cantina and made his way toward the stable, keeping in the darkness as much as possible. At the side of a clump of brush, he crouched to watch.

"He's sure got a lot of interest in our comin's and goin's," Riley said. "Thinks that maybe we're gettin' our horses to go somewhere. All set to trail us with some of his friends, I reckon."

"*Si!* It will be wise for us to sleep one at a time," Esteban declared.

Drake was growing nervous watching beside the clump of brush. Riley and Esteban went quietly on around the stable, around an adobe hut adjoining it, came to the streak of blackness cast by the cantina building itself, and got inside again. They lounged at the head of the bar and watched the open door.

A moment later, Drake appeared. One of his men undoubtedly had gone out in search of him.

"Howdy, Drake!" Riley greeted. "Been out takin' a walk in the moonlight?"

Drake lurched toward them, his eyes blazing angrily, and Riley quickly balanced his body and bent slightly forward, standing on the balls of his feet, ready for any emergency.

"I'm gettin' pretty sick o' you, Riley!" Drake said.

"Any time you want a pill, Drake, I'll furnish it—a lead one! Does your whole gang run to ambushin'? Better pull in your claws, Drake, and wait for reënforcements. I understand you've got some friends comin' along in a few days.'

"If you're wise, Riley, you'll leave Mesaville before they get here."

"I never did have any sense—so I reckon I'll stay."

Drake muttered something and turned away from them, to cross the room. Riley and Esteban went toward the rear of the cantina, where a door opened into the patio.

Esteban opened the door of the little cell-like room and went inside. Riley remained in the shadows. When he was sure that nobody had seen or heard him, he slipped into his room and fixed the blankets on the cot so they would resemble a sleeping man, as he had done the night before. But he did not remain in the room. He estimated that later, the moonlight, streaming into the room through the little, steel-barred window, would touch that roll of blankets and indicate a human form.

Riley returned to the patio and sat down with his back to the wall. He dozed, awoke, and dozed again. And again he awoke, to find that the moon had wheeled the sky, and that it was about three o'clock in the morning. His hand strayed to his holster, and he drew out his six-gun.

He had seen nothing, but some slight sound had brought him from half-slumber. He did not shift his position, but watched and listened. And he heard the sound of a boot crunching gravel.

There was a darker shadow against the patio wall, on the opposite side. It moved along the wall slowly, a foot at a time. Without making the slightest noise, Dan Riley got to his feet.

The shadow crept along beneath the arches, from door to door. Finally, it stopped beside the door of Riley's room. Then it slipped along to the window, which was only a hole in the adobe, protected by a network of bars.

In the faint streak of moonlight, Riley could see a man's hand go up, could tell that the hand held a gun. The night was split with flame and shattered with a roar. Three shots barked. Then the man at the window turned and started to run to the end of the patio.

"Here I am, Drake!"

The fleeing man stopped, astounded. In front of him was Dan Riley, standing openly in the moonlight. Drake snarled, and threw up his gun again.

But Dan Riley did not wait for that shot. He placed his own where it pleased him. Drake dropped his gun and reeled back against the patio wall, as the cantina door was hurled open and the big room vomited men into the patio.

"Tried to kill me while I was asleep, huh?" Riley said. "I put that bullet in your shoulder on purpose, Drake. It's just a warnin'. Next time, I'll put it through your heart!"

A score of men had heard the accusation, and noticed that it had not been denied. Pete Drake, clutching his wounded shoulder, went through the gate and out into the night.

CHAPTER IX

Outlaws' Stronghold

RILEY slept late, which is to say until sunrise. Esteban already was up, and in the cantina, talking to Lopez, who seldom slept at all, fearful that he might miss a few coins if he did.

"Señor Dan!" Esteban cried. "What is this they tell me? Why did you not call to me?"

"You was snorin' somethin' beautiful," Riley said, as he gulped coffee and ate an omelet of peppers and grated chicken.

"It is rumored that Señor Drake had his shoulder mended, got his horse, and set out over the north trail."

"Goin' to meet his friends," Riley said. "A couple of 'em are due from Quebrada today. He'll tell 'em that I'm here, and they'll come into town ready to be violent, I reckon."

Carmelita came from the kitchen with fresh coffee, and Riley kicked Esteban under the table. "Get away from here," he said. "And you needn't grin like that, either. I ain't makin' love to the girl. She might have somethin' private to tell me about somethin'."

Esteban arose and bowed. "It is not the girl, señor, but the state of mind," he said. "There are other girls—some with golden hair and blue eyes. I shall sing a love song for you yet!"

"You get the hell out o' here!" Riley growled. "I don't like yellow hair any better than I do black."

Esteban departed, and Carmelita approached. Her eyes glistened as she looked at Dan Riley, and she talked as she poured the fresh coffee for him. Nobody was near.

"I have overheard some things that I do not quite understand, Señor Dan. But I can tell them to you, and perhaps they are worth something, and perhaps nothing."

"What is it?"

"Plans have been made for an enormous number of horses and cattle to be run over the Line."

"They're doin' that every day, Carmelita. Wet cattle. Stolen on one side and sold on the other."

"These are to go from the States to the other side. Thousands and thousands of them, señor, with scores of men in the drive. It is all arranged. It is to happen at a certain time. It is a great plot of some sort, señor."

"Somebody's crazy," Riley declared. "Where the blazes could rustlers get those thousands and thousands, huh? And runnin' them in that direction. Nobody over there to buy that many. Ain't got money enough, even at rustler prices."

"Could they not get the stock from the great Granton ranch, Señor Dan?"

"Sure! That ranch is lousy with stock, horses and cattle both. Owned by a syndicate—five big ranches in one. But it'd be a job, don't you see, Carmelita? Have to be a lot of men in on it. They'd have to make the drive all at once to get away with it, in two nights anyhow. Couldn't be done, unless somebody on the inside—"

Dan Riley ceased speaking, sat up abruptly in his chair as though an electric shock had gone through his body. Somebody on the inside!

"What is the trouble, Señor Dan?" the girl asked.

"Just happened to think of somethin'," he said. "You listen to me, Carmelita. This here might be important—big enough to get the government interested, even. Learn all you can about it for me, huh?"

"Gladly, señor!" She flushed with pleasure.

"Know any of the men mixed up in it?"

"One of them was talking to Señor Drake."

"I reckon! You prob'ly can expect a lot of strangers around here some night, spendin' their money in the cantina. Then they'll disappear, and you won't ever see 'em again. And a lot of Granton horses and cattle will be disappearin' at about the same time. Now you'd better get away from me. We don't want to be seen talkin' together too much."

"I understand, Señor Dan. Men might think that I was giving you information."

"It ain't that. They might think we was sweetheartin', and that'd be a hell of a lot worse."

Throughout the day, Riley and Esteban rested, and watched the north trail, also the hills to the west. If Drake had gone out to meet Bully Bancord and Hank Whaley, and warn them of Riley's presence, the pair might try to slip into town and catch Riley off guard.

IT was the middle of the afternoon when they saw a puff of dust coming along the trail, a moving black spot ahead of it.

The horseman cut across the plaza, the hoofs of his mount sending the gravel flying. He skidded his horse to a stop and vaulted out of the saddle, trailing the reins and not stopping to tether the horse. Then he hurried into the cantina.

A few minutes later, Lopez thrust his head through an open window of the cantina.

"You out there, Riley?" he howled.

"Right here, Lopez! What's the trouble?"

"Nothing. Just stay there, señor."

Riley and Esteban got to their feet, wondering what that might mean. Out of the cantina door rushed the rider who had just reached the town, to hurry up to them.

"Dan Riley? Got a letter for you," he said, handing it over. "Told me to fan and fog and get it in your hands as soon as possible."

"Wait a minute," Riley said." You've delivered it, so there ain't any more rush. Light up a cigarette, while I have a look."

There were two notes, strictly speaking. The first was signed by Bill Kline, the superintendent:

Mr. Riley:

I made an unfortunate error yesterday, which I hope you will be broadminded enough to overlook. I was laboring under a misunderstanding.

Please come to the ranch at once and assume the position of assistant foreman Mr. Granton offered you. You may also bring your comical friend along.

The second note was very short, written in a woman's hand. It said: "Please come at once, Dan." And it was signed "Betty."

Riley folded the notes and toyed with them while he looked at the messenger.

"All right! I'll tend to this," Riley said. "Thanks, kid, for gettin' here with it so quick."

"You're the man who shot Sam Akers, ain't you?" the puncher asked admiringly.

"I am, but I don't like to have such things talked about much."

"I just wanted to say," the boy declared, "that you did a mighty good job."

"A lot of folks agree to that. You'd better rest up yourself and your horse before you go back."

The puncher hurried back into the cantina, and Don Esteban Marcos Pulido, choking with curiosity, approached his friend.

"Esteban, brace yourself against the cantina wall," Riley interrupted. "You're about to be shocked. We're goin' to work at the Granton ranch after all. They just can't get along without us. They've sent for us."

"Pots and pans—and potatoes!" said Esteban. "Do you think it wise, Señor Dan?"

"I sure do. Them hombres ought to be there today or tomorrow. I can handle 'em as well there as here, and maybe better. You see about getting a horse from Lopez."

Esteban went into the cantina, shaking his head as though to say that Fate dealt him many a hard blow. Then Riley hurried to the stable to get his own horse, and presently Esteban appeared with Lopez to get ready another horse. They led the mounts out and across to the cantina hitch rail.

"Lopez, I want to borrow a couple of rifles and some ammunition," Riley said. "One for me and one for Esteban. I know you've got plenty of guns."

"Rifles, señor?" Lopez gasped. "You are going hunting, perhaps?"

"Yeah! And maybe after big game."

THROUGH the sun they rode, taking the messenger along with them. He had a fresh horse, for the Granton ranch always kept a couple in Lopez' stable for the use of their men.

When they came to the broken country, Riley got his rifle handy, and Esteban, as usual, emulated him. But there was no ambush, much to Riley's surprise and Esteban's delight. They got safely through the pass and into the open, and headed for the ranch, the buildings of which they could see in the distance.

They came to the end of the lane. Riley scrutinized everything within sight. Everything seemed to be normal. A few men were working down by the barns and horse corral, and a couple were sitting on a bench in front of the bunkhouse.

"Reckon we'd better ride down to Kline's office, to find what all this is about," Riley said.

He led the way, Esteban close behind him, the horses at a walk. The young puncher turned and made for the horse corral, to put up his mount. Riley dismounted in front of the little office building and tied his horse, and Esteban remained in the saddle.

"Señor Dan, I shall not get on the ground until I am sure we are to remain," Esteban said. "The people around this ranch have the habit of changing their minds. No doubt, we shall be sent away again."

Riley laughed and knocked on the door.

"Come in!" He recognized the gruff voice of Bill Kline.

Riley opened the door and stepped inside, hat in hand. He regretted that fact an instant later. Even dropping a hat takes a fraction of a second, and that length of time often is important in drawing a gun.

On either side of the door, a man was standing. From either side, Dan Riley felt the muzzle of a gun jab him suddenly in the ribs.

"Get 'em up!" one of the men growled.

The other knocked Riley's hand aside and got the six-gun out of his holster.

"What's all this?" Riley demanded. "You sent for me, didn't you, Kline?"

"I did, yes. I wrote that letter."

"Then why have a couple of hombres stick me up?"

"Just wanted to get your gun away, Riley. You boys can clear out now."

The gun muzzles were removed, the two men went out and closed the door. Riley saw that Bill Kline had a gun on his desk before him.

"You needn't be afraid of me, Kline," Riley said. "I ain't killin' mad over what happened yesterday."

"Nobody's afraid of you, Riley . . . . Come out, boys!"

From behind the big filing cases in a corner, two men stepped forth—Bully Bancord and Hank Whalen.

CHAPTER X

Stampede

DON ESTEBAN MARCOS PULIDO, slouching in his saddle with the natural grace of fatigue, saw the door of the office open, and two men come out. Esteban gave them a single glance and decided that they were two ordinary cowpokes who had been in to see the foreman, probably to get hired or fired. That was all cowboys did—get hired, fired, drunk and broke.

They sauntered toward Esteban, but seemingly gave him no attention. With his forearms folded across the pommel of his saddle, and his eyes half closed, Esteban bent forward, comfortably relaxed, and looked over their heads.

"Look at this, hombre!" one of them said to him, stopping beside the horse.

Esteban looked, then sat erect. What he saw was the muzzle of a gun pointing at his head.

"Step right down out of that saddle and tie your horse," the other commanded.

Resistance would have been futile, and Esteban knew it. He stepped down, and he tied the horse. Then, with a man on either side of him, he was conducted down toward one of the barns.

"What is the meaning of this, señores?" Esteban asked. "Is it possible that you make a mistake?"

"No mistake, hombre! We've got orders to put you in a safe place."

"What has become of Señor Riley?"

"He's in the office. Step along!"

One prodded him with a gun muzzle, and Esteban stepped along.

They took him to a long, low adobe building, opened a door and shoved him in, closed the door and put up the heavy bar which secured it.

Esteban blinked to focus his eyes. He found that he was in a big tool shed, in which at present there were scarcely any tools. He got to a window, which was only about a foot square and would not have admitted of the passage of his body, even if steel bars had not been over it.

Through that window, he had a noble view of countless acreage and a background of hills dotted with thousands of beef critters and horses. But Esteban did not care to look at cattle and horses, or hills. He wanted to know what was going on.

Back in the office building, Dan Riley had stood against the wall to look at the men before him. There was Bully Bancord, his swarthy face asnarl, and Hank Whalen looking at him from beady eyes. Killers, both.

"Walked right into it," Bully Bancord said.

"Got him!" Hank Whalen added.

"I imagine it was the lady's note that brought him," Kline put in, laughing a bit. "Anyhow, he's here."

"You've been raisin' hell, ain't you, Riley?" Bancord said. "Plugged Bill Morgan, and shot up Sam Akers, then nicked Drake in the shoulder. Must think you're an army."

"Been all over the country lookin' for us, huh?" Whalen asked. "Well, you've found us."

Dan Riley spoke for the first time since their appearance from behind the cabinets: "That's the same thing Sam Akers said."

"Yeah?" Bancord snarled. "You won't handle us like you did Akers."

"When are you goin' to kill me?" Riley asked. "Goin' to wait till night, so there won't be too many get wise? Think the two of you can do it, me without a gun? Maybe you'd better call in a few more of your gang. Kline, there! He looks like a killer—if the other man's back was turned."

"Damn you, Riley!" Kline roared. "I won't stand too much, no matter what—"

He stopped when Bancord gave him a swift look.

"Thanks!" Riley said. "You tipped off just what I wanted to know. You've got some reason for wantin' to keep me alive for a while. Glad of that! Maybe you want Dude Lachmer to be here for the big party. That'd make it complete."

THEY lashed his wrists, opened the door, and led him out. Down toward the adobe tool shed they took him, in the wake of Esteban and his escort. They opened a door, thrust him inside, and closed the door again.

"Try to get out of that," Whalen barked at him, after the door was closed. "We'll be down to see you later, Riley."

Then they went away.

The tool shed was a long building of two rooms. They had put Esteban in one, and Riley in the other. It took Riley only a few seconds to convince himself that getting out of the shed was practically an impossibility.

"Señor Dan!"

Riley barely could hear the voice. He hurried to the wall between the two rooms. "Yeah?" he asked.

"This is Esteban. What has happened, señor?"

"Bancord and Whalen are here. They caught me neat. Kline, the foreman, is in with them. I don't know what's goin' on."

"And what shall we do now, señor?" Esteban asked. "We must escape. It is unthinkable that Don Esteban Marcos Pulido should be incarcerated in such a vile place, with dust and cobwebs, and perhaps rats and vermin."

"How's it look on your side?"

"Like a fortress," said Esteban. "It would take dynamite to make a way out."

"Keep lookin' around, and I'll do the same over here. We may find somethin'."

As he searched around the room in which they had imprisoned him, Dan Riley was doing some heavy thinking. He did not believe that Betty Granton had written that note as a decoy. No doubt, she had been told by Kline that he was sincere in bringing Riley out to work. Probably she had not known that Bancord and Whalen had reached the ranch.

Riley guessed that Drake had gone out to meet them, had told them what had happened, and they had turned from the trail and gone to the ranch instead of continuing on to Mesaville.

What was behind the whole thing, Riley could only guess. And that was something to be considered in the future. The first thing was to get out of this predicament.

He searched around the room in which he found himself, trying to find a way out. There was but the one door, and two windows. The windows were impossible as avenues of escape. The door was heavy and thick, with the hinges embedded in the adobe, and was fastened on the outside with a heavy metal bar. That, too, seemed impossible.

Sometime later, men came to the tool shed, armed men who made sure that the prisoners would not escape. They opened the door and thrust a basket of food in at Riley, and did the same for Esteban, also a bottle of water for each.

They ate, each saving some of the food for later, and drank sparingly of the water. The darkness deepened. Night came down from the hills, and the moon came up.

"Señor Dan!"

"Yeah?" Riley asked.

"I have just noticed, señor, that in the north corner of the dividing wall there is a flaw. It originally was a flaw in construction, and the adobe has crumbled, and the rats I but now despised have enlarged it. Have you tools on your side?"

"Sure!" Riley betrayed a little excitement.

"Suppose, señor, that you take a pick and get to work enlarging the hole. We can be together, at least. Together, we may do more than when separated. I know a trick."

"That's great, Esteban!"

"You do the digging, señor, and I shall sing to cover the noise you make, if any guard is outside the shed. Also, from this window I can see if one approaches."

"Start your singin'," Riley told him.

Don Esteban lifted his voice in song. He stood at the open window. His was not a bad voice, at that. And he seemed to put heart into his singing.

Riley got the pick, found the flaw in the wall, and began his work. It was difficult in the dark, but he kept at it. Half his blows went where he did not wish them to go. However, after a time

he could tell that the hole was getting larger.

He had some matches, and he risked lighting one and making a better and closer examination of the excavation. After that, he worked to better advantage.

ESTEBAN ceased his song, and Riley his labor while both rested. They got down close to the earth and talked through the hole.

"Señor Dan!"

"Yeah?"

"I am quite sure that my song is appreciated."

"The hell it is! I'm endurin' it only 'cause it covers the noise I'm makin'."

"But certainly such a fine song could not be appreciated by a man without soul, such as yourself, my friend. I was not referring to you."

"What do you mean, Esteban?"

"You were not listening to the words? I sang several verses, as would anybody, and then I used words of my own, señor! I said brave men were imprisoned in the shed of tools, and for a light to be shown at the window three times if there was hope of rescue."

"What damned foolishness—"

"And the lamp was shown three times, señor, a moment ago."

"What? Who'd do it? Must have just happened that way."

"Who? The beautiful— But I am not allowed to mention women!"

"Mention it this once and tell me what the blazes you mean."

"The Señorita Betty, no less. Some months ago, when I was in Mesaville, I sang for her at the general store. And this song is the one she liked best—a bit from Old Spain. So I repeated it, and put in the extra verses. I am sure she understood, for the light appeared at the window."

"What can she do, if she did understand?" Riley asked. "There's somethin' goin' on at this ranch that's so big it's got me guessin'. I don't think the girl and her father are in on it. It's a chance they may be watched."

"When you are ready to continue the digging, señor, I'll sing some more."

"Go ahead. I'll have to stand it."

Esteban sang again, a different song this time, and Riley kept busy with the pick. A chunk of adobe fell out. After that, it was easier. Within a quarter of an hour, he squeezed through the hole and stood beside Esteban.

Riley struck a match and looked around the room. Something he saw on the opposite side attracted him. He went over, and struck another match.

What he saw was a pile of old sacks that had contained fertilizer—dry old sacks that would burn readily and also send up a huge cloud of smoke. And above them, on a wide shelf, were cans of paints and oils left over from painting one of the big barns.

He explained rapidly to Esteban:

"We'll start it in the other room. The flames and smoke will shoot through the window. That side of the shed is away from the house and bunkhouse. It'll look like the big barn on fire, and bring everybody."

"Splendid, señor!"

"It'll make it as hot as hell in this room, though. And we'll have to have something ready to plug up that hole, or the smoke'll come in here and kill us off."

Riley got through the hole, and Esteban passed through the sacks, paints, oils. Then he prepared something with which to stop up the hole, while Riley, in the other room, arranged the sacks under the window, drenched them with oil, heaped cans of paint upon them.

"Get ready in there, Esteban!" he called.

"I am ready, señor."

Riley touched it off, got to the hole and through it, and stretched out on the floor to watch. The tiny flame caught and spread. The sacking began to burn. A cloud of smoke was pulled through the window by the wind, and flames shot out after it.

They blocked up the hole, and rushed to a window to watch. Both Riley and Esteban began yelling. Men rushed out of the bunkhouse, and out of the ranchhouse. The ranch bell began ringing.

DOWN toward the tool shed rushed a score of men. Hank Whalen was with them, though Bancord was not. But others in the group knew of the prisoners in the tool shed.

"Get 'em out!" Whalen cried. "They'll roast in there!"

Esteban was at the window, begging for release.

"The smoke, señores! It stifles! Poor Señor Riley—in the other room—"

They did not have any particular fear of Esteban, so Whalen told a couple of the men to get him out. They thought that Riley was in the other room. Riley stood beside the door as it was opened, and Esteban was in front of it, back a short distance, and reeling as though about to fall. They had pulled out the stuffing in the hole, and smoke was pouring into the room.

The door was opened, and those outside saw Esteban as though about to fall, overcome by the smoke. Two men remained to attend to him, and the others rushed to the other end.

That was what Riley had been hoping for. One of the men rushed in and caught Esteban as he was about to fall. But Esteban suddenly regained strength, it seemed, and began fighting. The other man started in to aid his comrade.

Riley struck him with the handle of the pick, and he went down. He ran forward, and struck the one wrestling with Esteban. Both men were ranch night guards, and wore guns.

Riley and Esteban got the guns.

"At my heels!" Riley snapped.

"On them, señor, if you do not step lively enough."

They rushed through the smoke and turned toward the dark side of the building. There they stopped an instant, getting the smoke out of their smarting eyes. Then they started on, making for the dark spots.

They came to a tiny gulch, dropped into it, panting. Back at the tool shed was a chorus of yells, and they could hear Hank Whalen howling for Kline. The escape had been discovered.

"Where do we go now, señor?" Esteban asked.

"I thought maybe you'd like to sing."

"Music is not in me at the moment, señor. My effort was for nothing. I asked a señorita to save us—then we save ourselves."

"She knows we're around here somewhere, and she may need our help," Riley said. "The main thing now is to get away and hide. I want 'em to think we've made a run for it. So, we'll get down to the horse corral."

Riley started off, Esteban keeping as close to him as possible. They kept to the shadows, and moved by a circuitous route. Men were scattering away from the tool shed and barn in every direction, commencing the search for them. Others came hurrying from the bunkhouse carrying lanterns. The sacking had burned, and the flames had died down. The heavy pall of smoke drifted low over the ground.

They circled the big barn and one of the bunkhouses, and came to the horse corral. There should have been a guard at the corral, but he had gone to the fire.

"Get the gate open," Riley whispered. "Then get out of the way. I'll go on the other side and start somethin'."

Esteban opened the big corral gate. Riley went around to the opposite side and got upon the fence. The horses in the corral—some twenty of them—already were excited because of the fire and confusion. Dan Riley gave a yell that started them. They began rushing around the corral. One found the gate open, and dashed out. Others followed.

Past the bunkhouse the frenzied animals tore, some to run on past the barn and toward the pasture, others to turn toward the lane and thunder down it toward the distant road.

"They're gettin' away!" somebody shouted. Riley thought he recognized Kline's voice. "Saddle up and take after 'em! Plenty of horses in the other corral!"

Riley and Esteban slipped back into the shadows, retreated for a hundred yards, and finally stopped at the edge of a gulch where there were large rocks behind which they could hide.

They were free, they each had a gun, and it was thought they had ridden for the trail, so the pursuit would go there.

"Not bad at all," Riley said. "But we've got work to do when things quiet down."

CHAPTER XI

A Bribe Refused

HALF the men saddled up and took after the fugitives, as they supposed. They dashed for the road, went in all directions, the majority starting a race for town. The pursuers thought that Riley and Esteban had gone that way, realizing that if they had not here was a chance to visit the cantina

for a couple of hours and have a good excuse for doing so.

Those who remained at the ranch went to the bunkhouses to turn in for the night. There was a light in the office building, and the ranchhouse was ablaze with light on the lower floor. The night guards had resumed their stations.

Riley and Esteban watched the scene from a distance, ready to drop into the gully and get away if anybody approached.

"Our horses have run away with the others, Señor Dan," Esteban said.

"We don't need horses now. We ain't goin' anywhere."

"You mean to remain here, señor?"

"Two of the men I want are here."

"But they have so many friends here, also," Esteban protested.

"And some decent folks might be in trouble, and need our help. We're goin' to do some prowlin' around the big house, and we sure want to be careful that no guard sees us. On your toes, Esteban!"

Esteban groaned, and got up. But Riley knew the attitude was assumed. Esteban was not fooling him at all. Riley knew that he was alert, cautious, courageous, and loyal.

They slipped through the shadows and reached the lane, where the overhanging trees made an avenue of darkness. Along this they went, walking on the grass. As they neared the house, Riley signaled a stop.

Crouching against the bole of a big tree, they watched and listened for a time. There was no guard at the house, evidently. So Riley led the way forward again. They came to the corner of the veranda, and followed the side wall. A lighted window was ahead of them—a window which was raised at the bottom a few inches. Riley made for it.

He could hear voices. Pressing close against the wall, he edged forward and risked peering into the room beneath the shade.

John Granton was sitting at one end of a long table. Kline was walking around, doing the talking. Bully Bancord and Hank Whalen were in the room also.

"Understand me, Granton, if you don't come in with us, we'll keep you prisoner here in your own house till it's over," Kline was saying.

"I'll make no deal with a bunch of crooks, Kline," Granton said.

"We'll make you look like a crook, too, so you might as well get some of the profit."

"You haven't explained the scheme to me entirely."

"That isn't necessary. You don't have to know everything. It's enough for you to know that a lot of stock is going to be missing. You won't be able to account for it. You'll report that everything is being done, with no results. Kick to the government about it, and let 'em call out the fool cavalry, if they want to—when it's too late to do anything."

"You're running the stock into Mexico, naturally," Granton said. "You'd not dare do anything else. But what can you do with it over there?"

"That's our business."

"I can't believe it of you, Kline. You represent thirty per cent of the shareholders of the syndicate. You're robbing them."

"I represent 'em, and get damned little out of it. My shares aren't big enough to turn me in great profits."

"And these men associated with you!" Granton exclaimed. "They're criminals!"

"Plenty good enough," Kline told him. "Preachers couldn't do the job. These men know the country. They've lived over the Line."

"What is it you wish me to do, Kline?"

"Make fake reports to the company's headquarters and the big shareholders. Cover us."

"Which means that you'll raid again and again, steal more stock."

"Right. Work over the brands, too. But that won't bother us much. This stock is goin' to stop finally up in the hills where there aren't many questions asked."

"I'll have nothing to do with it, Kline."

"It's your say, Granton. Then we'll keep you prisoner till we're in the clear. You'll be sick in bed, if anybody comes callin'. And your girl—we'll keep Betty in her rooms on the upper floor. She won't get a chance to tip off anything. I can handle the situation. Our men are watching the others. If there's trouble, our men will tend to 'em, and have a story to tell if the sheriff comes fussing around."

"Kline, you're a scoundrel!" Granton cried. "You'll never get away with this! If you harm Betty, or even offer her an affront—"

"Nobody'll harm your girl, but she's going to be kept a prisoner. Come on, Granton—get to bed. Bancord, you and Whalen go to the office building and wait for me there. We've got to have a talk tonight."

"Don't forget that we want Dan Riley's hide," Bancord said. "He's just fool enough to stumble into the middle of the plot, and spoil things."

"The men'll get him, even if they have to follow him to Mesaville. I'll be along as soon as I've posted the guards."

DAN RILEY slipped back into the shadows with Esteban, and they circled the house and went toward the office building. Riley was doing some heavy thinking again.

"Ropes, Esteban!" he said presently.

"Ropes, señor?"

"Three or four of 'em, Esteban. Saddles stacked down by the corral. Watch out for the guards. Get the ropes and bring 'em to me, huh? I'll be at the side of the office buildin'. Make it quick!"

Esteban slipped into a dark patch and disappeared. Riley went on toward the office, moving cautiously, alert for the guards. Near the office, he crouched in the darkness and waited. Bully Bancord and Hank Whalen came down from the house together, and went into the office. Riley crept nearer.

It was some time later when Kline appeared, striding through the moonlight. He entered the office and closed the door. Riley crept up beside the building and listened beneath a window.

They were talking openly now about their plans, and Riley got enough to understand. His eyes opened wide when he comprehended the scheme. He had heard of rustlers before, but never of anybody stealing practically the entire stock of a huge ranch.

Kline and some others had a vast acreage of leased land in the Mexican hills. They would run over the stock and hold it on their range. Thousands and thousands of the finest horses and cattle. Stock ready to be marketed, stock for breeding purposes. They would leave on the Granton ranch only a few scattered animals that would not make even a decent herd at roundup time.

Riley smiled as he listened. Did Kline think that he could manage the rogues with whom he dealt? They would aid him now. But once the stock was over the line and on the new range, Mr. Kline would find them turning against him, kicking him out under some subterfuge, possibly even killing him to get him out of the way.

A sibilant hiss attracted Riley's attention. Esteban was at hand. Riley slipped back through the shadows to his side.

"Señor, I have here four good ropes," Esteban said. "Some of the horses have returned to the corral. There are plenty of saddles and bridles."

"Great!" Riley exclaimed.

"And what is the program now, Señor Dan, if I may ask?"

"You'll be surprised," Riley told him. "The tough job is goin' to be gettin' four horses ready for the trail without bein' caught at it."

"Ah! That reminds me, Señor Dan, my friend! The guard at the horse corral ran across me while I was getting the ropes. I was compelled to hit him twice with the barrel of my gun, and I fear that I cut his head a little. Not wishing to be distressed by his cries of pain, I gagged him with his own neckcloth, then used another rope with which to bind him and tie him to the fence."

"Yeah?" Riley chuckled. "Esteban, you ain't no song singer. You're a tough hombre! That's what kept you so long?"

"And now what, Señor Dan?"

"You stay right here and wait."

Riley went to the window again to listen. He got more details. And presently he rushed back beside Esteban, hissed a warning at him, and crouched behind a rock. The door of the office was opened, and the three men came out.

"See you early in the morning," Kline told the others. *"Buenas noches!"*

KLINE had a room in the ranch house, and there he went. Bancord and Whalen had been assigned a small adobe hut near the barn. They hurried toward it now.

Riley and Esteban trailed them, the latter carrying the ropes and wondering what was about to happen. They crept close to the hut and listened while Bancord and Whalen hurried with their undressing.

"They've turned in, all right," Riley whispered. "Now we've got to get busy, Esteban."

Keeping to the shadows, they came to the horse corral, and looked over the stock as well as they could. Riley's horse was there, and the one Esteban had ridden out from town. They got saddles and bridles ready, and Riley called softly to his horse.

Letting the animal out the gate, Riley got bridle and saddle on him, and mounted. Then Esteban opened the gate, and Riley rode inside. He roped the horse Esteban had used, and got him out.

It took time to rope two more and prepare them for the trail. But it finally was accomplished, and then Riley and Esteban mounted, and each led another horse. They rode away from the corral and down into the gulch, to follow it until they were back of the shed where the two men were sleeping.

They tied all the horses to a hitch rail and crept up to the shed. Through the open window, snores rolled out at them. Dan Riley knew there would be no lock on the door.

"We capture 'em, Esteban—understand?" Riley whispered. "And we don't want any noise about it. You got those ropes?"

"They are here by the wall, señor?"

"We won't dare light the lantern, but there's moonlight enough in the hut for our work. This is goin' to be a ticklish job, Esteban. Bancord and Whalen ain't babies."

They slipped around to the door, and Riley opened it gently. Guns held ready, they crept inside, and closed the door behind them. For a moment they were silent and motionless against the wall.

The two men were sleeping soundly. Riley and Esteban crept carefully up to the cots. Riley pressed Esteban's arm in signal. Guns were jammed against the heads of two sleeping men. They came awake to a full realization of their position, except that they could not see their captors plainly enough to establish identity. Riley spoke:

"Not a move, hombres, 'less you're ready to die! Roll over on your faces!"

A little persuasion, and they rolled over, and had their wrists bound behind their backs. Then they turned over again, and were gagged effectually with their own neckcloths. After that, they were forced to sit up on their cots.

"We're goin' away from here, hombres," Riley told them. "I ain't got time to let you put on the rest of your clothes—ain't goin' to run the risk. You've both got on full-length underwear, and that's lucky, 'cause you might catch cold otherwise. Step along, gents!"

Their hands were tied behind their backs. Around the neck of each was the noose of a lariat. They were pulled out of the adobe hut and taken behind it, flinching as the gravel bit into the soles of their bare feet.

When they came to the horses, they were compelled to mount, and Riley tied their ankles beneath the horses' bellies. It had been so easy that it seemed ridiculous. Bancord and Whalen had no chance to put up a fight without risking death. And they had recognized Riley, and knew that he would not hesitate to shoot.

Each had decided to wait for a chance and make a desperate move. They had not expected the horses. And now they were mounted, and their horses were being led by Riley and Esteban, and they were taken into the gulch and along it, traveling until the ranch buildings had been left far behind.

Emerging from the gulch, Riley turned north across country, traveling where there was no trail. When he thought it was safe, he stopped the horses and removed the gags from the two men, and gave them water from a canteen.

"What you think you're doin', Riley?" Bancord demanded. "You know what'll happen to you for this, don't you?"

"You ain't in any position right now to threaten," Riley told him.

"Where are you takin' us?"

"You'll find out that later. Just now, we're makin' for the hills. Want to be in 'em before daylight."

"Our friends'll trail and catch you. Then you won't last five minutes."

"Two seconds before they blast me, you'll be blasted," Riley said. "Let's travel."

DAYBREAK found them far up in the hills, cutting across to a trail Esteban knew. When they found it, they stopped to give the horses a breathing spell.

"Señor Dan, life grows tame," Esteban said. "We have not been in any fighting for several hours. I thought, when I became your friend, that each day would be filled with tension."

"I know," Riley replied. "It's too damned quiet."

"*Sí, señor!* I feel a song coming on."

"Choke it back," Riley advised.

Bully Bancord barked out a string of profane words. "What are you goin' to do with us?" he cried. "We ain't got on any clothes but our underwear."

"Yeah! That's sure goin' to shock the countyseat, if we get there by daylight. You're goin' to jail!"

"Riley," Whalen said, "I sure take off my sombrero to you. We thought it was all a joke about you chasin' us so long. And you've been a fool to do it. What's it goin' to get yuh, huh?"

"A lot of satisfaction."

"Yeah? You can't buy anything with satisfaction, Riley. It won't get you wine or high livin', or even grub. You'd be a damned fool to take us in. Everybody'd give you a cheer—and forget it the next minute."

"Well—?" Riley asked.

"We know where there's a cache with plenty dinero in it. Take us there, take what you want, then turn us loose. Clothes there, too, and some grub, so we'll get along."

"How much dinero?" Riley asked.

"Maybe ten thousand, maybe a little less. Take it all. We can get more. Or, if you've got sense, throw in with us. We'll forget the past and be pals with you."

"You're forgettin' one thing—I'm a ranger," Riley reminded him.

"They laughed you out of the force," Whalen said. "Here's your chance to get square with 'em."

"I'm still on the force—special detail. Didn't know that, did you? Never dismissed. Just out on a little special hunt of my own. Got my badge fastened on the inside of my boot-top."

"So it's no use?" Bancord asked.

"No use! I'm takin' you in!"

"And a hell of a lot of good it'll do you!" Whalen cried. "We've got plenty of money for lawyers. We'll get out on bail and fade away. Then, Mr. Ranger Riley, we'll take the trail after you. And when we get you, we'll take you below the Line, where we've got some Yaqui friends. They're worse than the Apaches ever dared be. You'll be prayin' for 'em to kill you. But I've seen 'em keep a man alive a month, torturin' him every day. You're a strong man, Riley—you'd probably last longer."

"I'm takin' you in!" Riley said. "Let's be gettin' on."

They went on, with two cursing prisoners in their underwear damning the mounting sun and its heat, and the stinging flies, and the branches which flew back into their faces. Over the hills and down the slope on the opposite side they traveled. At midday, Riley called a halt beside a tiny creek.

The horses were watered, and the prisoners were helped out of their saddles and allowed to go to the creek to drink, and bathe their hands and faces and sore feet. Then their wrists were lashed behind their backs again.

"Let's travel!" Riley said.

Again, the prisoners were compelled to mount, though Whalen had to be persuaded with a blow on the head. On they went, down the slope, following narrow trails until they came to a hill.

They reached the crest, and, in the far distance, could see the buildings of the town. Down into a jumble of rocks they rode, where there was no trail at all, the horses feeling for safe footing.

Don Esteban Marcos Pulido could contain himself no longer. He began humming a song, and then he muttered the words, and then, when there came no rebuke from Dan Riley, he lifted his voice in earnest.

Riley was riding in advance, and Whalen's horse was fastened to his saddle with a lariat. Esteban was escorting Bully Bancord in like manner. The horses skidded and lurched, and the ropes grew taut at times.

Both Riley and Esteban were compelled to give all their attention to their mounts to prevent disaster. Esteban's song ceased for the moment.

"There is a good trail when we get to the bottom of the hill," Esteban said. "We follow it to a road, and then—"

Ahead of them, a gun cracked. The whining bullet flew past Dan Riley's head, struck a rock, went shrieking up the hill to bury itself in the dirt.

CHAPTER XII

Gallow's Bait

BACK at the ranch, Kline had connected the escape of Riley and Esteban in his mind with the strange disappearance of Bully Bancord and Hank Whalen.

Going to the adobe hut at daylight to hold a conference with the rogues, Kline had found them missing, but their clothes still there. A quick investigation disclosed four missing horses, including Riley's and the one that Esteban had ridden out from town.

So Kline called his men to him, and sent them away in pairs. They were to cut off the men and their prisoners, and bring them back, alive if possible. Some took to the hills, looking for a trail. Some hurried toward Mesaville, and others went toward the county seat. Kline had thought that Riley might make an attempt to deliver his prisoners to the sheriff.

Thus it happened that two of Kline's men heard Esteban's song of triumph, and they went into ambush and waited for the strange cavalcade to come along.

That shot had been fired at Riley deliberately, but the marksman had missed. And the next instant Riley and Esteban had their six-guns out, and were trying to get under cover with their prisoners.

"Put 'em up, Riley! We'll shoot to kill!"

One of Kline's men howled that at him, but it had no effect. Dan Riley was not the man to put up his hands at the order of somebody he could not even see. He managed to get his horse behind some rocks, and pull the led horse after him; Esteban did the same.

Riley vaulted out of his saddle and tied his mount to the nearest tree. Esteban sensed his plan, and did likewise. The prisoners, fastened in their saddles, and with their hands tied behind their backs, could not untie the horses and escape.

But they were not gagged now, and they could yell. Whalen shouted a warning at his unknown benefactors. Bancord bellowed advice. Riley and Esteban went into the brush, six-guns ready, to meet the enemy.

"Watch out for 'em, boys!" Whalen cried. "They're sneakin' through the brush."

Kline's men were mounted. One of the horses betrayed their position by a whinny. Riley and Esteban moved in that direction. There was a crashing in the brush, a burst of gunfire, a chorus of wild shouts.

Dan Riley heard Don Esteban Marcos Pulido give a war whoop that was a great distance from being a song. He caught sight of a man with blazing gun in hand, and recognized him as one he had seen at the ranch. Riley lurched forward, ready to fire.

His boot caught in a trailing vine, and he sprawled forward. He felt a blow high in his shoulder, and knew he had been hit. But he went on, crashing through the brush. Ahead of him, one of Kline's men was fighting to get his horse out of the open. The other had dismounted and taken to cover.

Don Esteban gave another war whoop and charged through the brush. Riley went after him as rapidly as possible. He got out into a tiny clearing, just in time to see the mounted man topple from his horse. From the brush at Riley's right came another shot. He whirled, threw up his gun, and fired. Headlong, his assailant plunged into the grass.

"Where are you, Señor Dan?" Esteban was shouting.

"Here!" Riley sat down quickly, for he experienced a moment of nausea and weakness.

Esteban came rushing through the brush and up to him.

"I got one of the hombres," he reported.

"Other one—over there. Better look at him—maybe only hurt."

"Are you hit, señor?"

"Yeah! Look at that man first. He may be able to shoot."

Esteban hurried away. Riley closed his eyes a moment, for a thousand red-hot needles seemed to be piercing his shoulder and arm. The fit of weakness passed, and he began to take stock. The wound was nothing serious, he decided, and there would not even be a dangerous loss of blood. He'd have Esteban bandage it.

Esteban came from the brush, carrying the wounded man across his back. He dumped him on the ground near Riley.

"The scoundrel is only wounded in the hip, señor," he reported. "I kicked his gun into the weeds. Now, I shall get the other."

Dan Riley was on his feet when Esteban got the other. He had been shot in the side, low down, the worst wound of the lot. Esteban dumped him on the ground, then went to get the two horses.

They got the wounded men on their

horses and lashed them there. Back through the brush they went, to where their prisoners were waiting.

THEY entered the county seat an hour before sunset, in the cool of the evening when everybody was out taking the air, causing a sensation. People followed them from the edge of the town to the jail, the crowd continually growing larger.

Esteban, looking straight ahead, was singing, though in a subdued voice. Beside him, Riley rode, hunched forward in the saddle, sick and weak. Behind them came the two prisoners in their underwear, and behind the prisoners, two horses carrying the wounded men lashed in their saddles.

The sheriff and some deputies met them at the door of the jail and got them inside. There was a call for a doctor. Things became orderly and official.

Don Esteban hovered around Riley until the doctor had done his work and assured him there was nothing to fear. Nor would any of the others dodge jail by dying, the physician promised them.

Then Dan Riley, already recuperating swiftly, held a conference with the sheriff, and told him all he had learned, all that had happened in which he had been concerned.

"Good work, boy!" the sheriff praised. "We've wanted these two hombres for a long time. Akers dead, too, eh? That leaves only one."

"Dude Lachmer. Leave him to me, sheriff, please. Let me finish out the deal."

"But you say he'll be due in a few days—and you're a wounded man."

"Only a shot in the shoulder, and my left shoulder at that. I'll be startin' back in the mornin'. I'm worried about Mr. Granton and his daughter as long as Kline's there."

"Then stop worryin'," the sheriff said. "I'm leavin' in an hour with a posse. We'll manage to get there before daylight. I'll tend to Mr. Kline."

"That'll be fine!" Riley said, as the sheriff left him.

Esteban was waiting, and hurried into the room.

"It was a triumph, Señor Dan!" he cried. "I regret that I have not always led a life of activity. I have been too indolent! Hereafter, I shall follow in your footsteps."

"You hush your damned nonsense, Esteban, and do somethin' for me."

"Anything, señor!"

"Fetch me my hat—and a hot runnin' iron."

Esteban grinned, and hurried from the room.

Riley sat on the edge of the bed and waited. It took some time, but presently Esteban returned, the hat in one hand and the hot iron in the other, and two deputies behind him half convinced that he intended to torture the wounded man.

Dan Riley took the hat and iron, and did the work he so long had wanted to do. From the leather hat band he burned two names—Bancord and Whalen.

IT was almost the middle of the morning before they started out, and then against the advice of the doctor. But Dan Riley would not listen to remaining in the county seat any longer. His job was not done.

His shoulder pained at times, but he did not mind that so much. Don Esteban's merry chatter offset the pain, as they rode up into the hills and Esteban sought and found old trails he knew, each one of which meant a short-cut to the Granton ranch.

Esteban led the way across rough ground until they came to a trail which ran toward the ranch. Side by side, they loped along, their neckcloths up now as protection against the dust. Riley found that his eyes blurred at times. He grew dizzy, reeled in the saddle. It was the sun, he kept telling himself—only the sun. He'd be all right when he got to the ranch and could get into some shade.

Over another hill they rode, and in the distance could see the buildings of the ranch.

"Soon now, señor, we shall be there," Don Esteban said, dropping his neckcloth and wiping the perspiration from his face. "You will be a hero. Remember, in the day of your glory, that I am your friend."

Riley made no reply. Esteban turned quickly to look at him—and was just in time to jerk his horse over and keep Riley from toppling from the saddle . . . .

So it happened that Dan Riley returned to consciousness from a realm of grotesque nightmares to find himself in

a room he never had seen before. He opened his eyes to contemplate a ceiling with cream-colored wallpaper upon it. He turned his head, and a groan escaped him.

"Oh!" He knew it was a woman gave the exclamation. An instant later he saw her, for she stepped around the bed upon which Riley was stretched.

Betty Granton bent over him, smiled at him, tucked the quilt in a little.

"Don't you remember?" she asked. "You almost fell out of the saddle, and Esteban brought you in. He fired his revolver until some of the men heard and went to help. That was yesterday."

"Yesterday?" Riley did not believe.

"Your wound was worse than you thought, and you must have lost a lot of blood. You'll be all right in a few days."

"Where am I?" Riley asked.

"In the ranch house, of course. We can't thank you enough, Dan, for what you've done. Dad was in an awful fix. He'd have been blamed for everything."

"Then they didn't get away with anything?"

"The sheriff and his men attended to that. They're here yet, and they're going to stay for a week or so. They're checking up the stock on the range, and watching the trails. Some of the gang have been arrested. They'll get the others when they come over from Mexico to drive back the stock."

"That's fine!" Riley said.

"Kline confessed to the whole thing, and they've sent him away. Now I'll get you something to eat."

SHE hurried from the room, and a moment later Esteban came in. He grinned when he saw Riley looking at him.

"Some men have all the good fortune," Esteban observed. "Did I suffer wound, undoubtedly they would toss me in a corner of the cantina and tell me to get over it. But they tuck you in a bed with white sheets, and give you a pretty girl for a nurse—"

"That'll be enough!" Riley interrupted. "You come closer, and make talk. You heard anything about that Dude Lachmer?"

"I have heard nothing, señor. If he is in the neighborhood, he has not advertised his presence."

"You listen to me, Esteban. Keep your ears open. I want to know the minute that Dude Lachmer comes in this part of the country. I don't want him to ride on when he learns what's happened."

"I quite understand, señor. There is a way of detaining him, perhaps. I can circulate the report in Mesaville that you have said Lachmer is afraid to meet you. That would hold him here, would it not?"

"You do that," Riley instructed. "That's just the thing. Say that I dare him to hang around Mesaville until I'm well enough to get to town. Let him know that the sheriff will keep hands off till I have my chance."

Betty Granton came in with a tray, and motioned for Esteban to leave. He bowed himself out backward, and a moment later they heard him singing softly as he descended the stairs.

Riley ate what she had brought.

"Dan, there's somebody here to see you—drove out from town and got here an hour ago. She wouldn't go away—"

"She?" He looked at her in surprise.

"Carmelita Lopez, the cantina girl. She seems to think a lot of you."

"Yeah? She's the one doped my wine and got me disgraced. But she's been doin' her best to square that. Maybe she's got some news I ought to know."

"Possibly," Betty Granton said. "Do you want to see her?"

"Sure, if it'll be all right. I don't mind tellin' you that she's been gatherin' information for me. Somethin' she told me gave me the first hint about that plot."

"I'll go and get her, Dan, and send her right in."

CHAPTER XIII

Outlaws' Challenge

CARMELITA'S face was white when she entered the bedroom. She had heard that Dan Riley had been terribly wounded. And she was afraid of this big house, and people like Betty Granton, and possibly just a little jealous of the latter, too. But she brightened when Riley smiled at her.

"Howdy, Carmelita!" he greeted. "What you think of this, huh? Got me in bed like some little old woman with heart trouble. On account of one little bullet."

"Señor Dan, they told me you might die!"

"'Shucks! Me die? Not for years and years yet. Couldn't die here anyhow, with all the care I'm gettin'. When I get up, reckon I'll be a softie."

"I'll leave you alone," Betty said. There seemed to be a trace of jealousy in her manner, too, as she left the room.

Dan Riley almost laughed at the thought. He, who hated all women, to have two jealous of him!

"What brought you 'way out here, Carmelita?" Riley asked.

"I felt that I had to come and see you, Señor Dan. I heard so many stories, and no two alike. I was afraid—"

"I ain't goin' to die, if that's what you're afraid of. Almost fell off my horse, 'count the heat, and Esteban brought me in. Then the fool doctor said I had to stay in bed. I'm strong enough to hear any news you've brought me."

"It is about Dude Lachmer, señor. He is coming up from Mexico, and probably will get to Mesaville tomorrow."

"You reckon he knows what's happened around here?"

"*Sí señor!* He has learned that you are here, and that Sam Akers is dead. He may not know about the two others. But he has said, Señor Dan, that he intends to—" She stopped.

"Intends to get me, huh? That's all right. I'm intendin' to get him, too. We'll see who's right."

"You must not think of meeting with him, señor, until you are well. They say he is swift and clever with a gun."

"He's all o' that. Got nerve, too. Ain't afraid of anything. Anything else, Carmelita?"

"I came to tell you about Dude Lachmer, and ask if there is anything I can do."

"Do anything to keep him in Mesaville till I can get there. I told Esteban the same. I don't want that hombre to get away from me again. With his pals gone, he might never come back to this part of the country. And I've got to have my record clean. Understand?"

"I understand, señor," she said. "Dude Lachmer shall stay in Mesaville until you are able to meet him."

Presently Betty Granton came back into the room. Carmelita got up and smiled at Riley again, then went away. And Don Esteban Marcos Pulido returned, to sit beside the bed and watch while Riley slept, and so give Betty Granton a chance to get some rest. Esteban knew she had been at the bedside from the moment Riley had been brought there—but Riley did not know that.

The following day Riley remained in bed, but the day after that he was allowed to dress and go downstairs again, and this time he went with Esteban down to the corral and had a visit with his horse.

No news had come from Mesaville regarding Dude Lachmer. They did not know whether he had arrived. But that evening a man returned from town with the mail, and he reported that he had a note for Riley, which was given him. Carmelita had written it, and Riley imagined the labor it had cost her. Only a few words, but they said that Dude Lachmer nad been in Mesaville two days, and was waiting.

"I've got to get on my feet, Esteban," Riley said. "That hombre will be thinkin' I'm afraid to come into town."

"Perhaps, señor, I could go in and settle the affair for you," Esteban said.

"Would that give me the chance to burn his name off my hat band? I'll do the settlin'. There's one hombre I wish I could take in alive. I'd admire to watch him stretch rope. Killed two men when he didn't have to do it—just 'cause he loves killin'."

"Such a man should die," Esteban said.

THE next day Dan Riley was alone on the veranda when a rider came loping down the lane toward the big house. He shaded his eyes with his hands and tried to make identification, but could not. The rider did not turn down toward the corrals, but came on toward the veranda steps.

Riley recognized him, then, as a man he had seen in Mesaville. He got out of the saddle and strode forward, and called from the bottom of the steps.

"Ain't you Dan Riley?"

"Yeah!"

"I've got a letter for you, then. A hombre in Mesaville paid me to leave it here, me bein' on my way past."

He ascended the steps, came along the veranda railing, and handed Riley the letter.

"Who's it from?" Riley asked.

"I didn't read it, mister. I don't read other folks' letters."

"I didn't say you did, damn it. I mean, who gave it to you?"

"I don't know his name—hombre who hangs around the cantina a lot. Don't think he wrote it. Think somebody gave it to him to give me."

"Sit down while I read it."

"Ain't got time. I'm bound for the Cross Bar Ranch, and want to get there before dark."

He went down the steps, mounted, and galloped up the lane. Riley watched until he disappeared in a dust cloud out on the trail, then ripped the envelope open.

It was as he had expected—the note was from Dude Lachmer. Riley's face burned as he read it:

How much longer are you going to bluff about being hurt, so you won't have to meet up with me? LACHMER.

Esteban was walking up from the corral now. Riley called to him, and handed him the note to read.

"Do not let it worry you, my friend," Esteban said. "It is but a trick of this Señor Lachmer to get you to fight when he will have the advantage."

"He says I'm bluffin' about bein' hurt."

"We know that is not the truth, señor."

"Yeah, but a lot of other folks don't know it. Lachmer will be tellin' that yarn around, and I couldn't stand people thinkin' I was afraid to meet up with him. It's time for a showdown, Esteban. I'll burn that last name off my hat band, or—"

"There can be no 'or,' señor," Esteban interrupted. "Certainly, you must burn off the last name. It is a thing to be expected."

"We're going to Mesaville this evenin'."

"Señor!" Esteban gasped.

"Right after it gets dark. Don't you tell anybody, 'cause they might want to stop me. You can go along."

"But certainly, Señor Dan! I would not allow you to go alone."

"Right after it's dark, you get the horses ready. Tell the corral guard anything you can think of. Take the horses down the lane to the well."

"I understand, señor."

"I'm usin' that room on the lower floor of the house now. I can slip through the window, and they won't miss me. You get the horses ready, and wait."

"Don't you think, señor, that it would be better to wait yet one more day?" Esteban begged. "You do not realize how weak you are."

"You think, after that note, I'd wait another day? How many men do you s'pose he showed that note to before he sent it out here? Don't you worry about me bein' weak. The ride in the cool night air will brace me up. And one shot will be enough. You get them horses ready!"

A LITTLE after dark, Dan Riley, who had been sitting in the ranch house parlor with the others, excused himself and went to his room. He was tired, he said, and wanted a good rest, and perhaps the following day he would be stronger.

He sat beside the window for a time, listening to the drone of the voices in the outer room. Then he locked the door and turned out the light, as though he had retired.

He dressed slowly, trying not to exert himself too much, taking plenty of time about it. Esteban might be some time getting the horses ready, he knew. But finally he buckled on his gunbelt, swung the holster back, and put on his hat.

Going across to a window, he unlatched it and raised it a bit at a time, careful not to make any noise. The drone of voices out in the parlor continued. Riley got through the window, and for a moment braced himself against the side of the house.

He felt better, and started going through the shadows to the front. The big trees along the lane kept the moonlight from exposing him. He made for the well, where he had told Esteban to wait.

But Riley did not have to wait long, for Esteban soon came through the shadows toward him, riding a ranch horse and leading Riley's own mount. He helped Riley up into the saddle, and they rode slowly down the lane and away from the house, unheard.

When they turned into the dusty road, they went at a fair rate of speed through the moonlight, and toward the first hill. There they stopped for a breathing spell. Esteban tendered a canteen, and Riley drank.

"How do you feel, señor?" Esteban asked.

"I'm feelin' better every minute," Riley declared. "I'll be strong enough by the time we get to town. What I needed was exercise and fresh air."

Riley began thinking of his chase and its culmination. Akers dead. Bancord and Whalen in jail and bound for the gallows. Dude Lachmer, the worst of the lot considered from any angle, in Mesaville waiting for a duel.

Only Lachmer stood between him and vindication. If he disposed of Lachmer, he could go back and face his old captain again. Then he would turn in his badge, and consider his work at an end, and return to the Granton ranch and settle down to a prosaic job at so much a month and found.

After a time they topped a hill from the crest of which they could see twinkling lights in the distance—Mesaville. They stopped for a moment, drank water, made and lighted cigarettes, rested.

They continued along the trail, watching the twinkling lights of the distant town blinking at them through the clear air. On a gust of wind came the din of the cantina—the piano being hammered, somebody singing, loud voices, laughter.

They came to the corner of the plaza and stopped their horses in the shadow of the blacksmith shop. Esteban tendered the canteen again, and Riley drank deeply.

"Plenty o' time," Riley said. "I think I'll have another smoke, Esteban."

"Sí Senor!" Esteban said. "It is a tonic for the nerves."

Riley rolled a cigarette. His hands were not shaking at all now. The weakness seemed to have left him, and new strength to flow into his body, as though purposely for the ordeal he faced. He snapped a match, ignited the smoke, and puffed slowly.

"Is there anything I may do to be of service?" Esteban asked.

"Not a thing, except to keep your eyes open and see that it's a square deal. We'll tie up our horses at the cantina. I don't reckon he'd jump me foul. Dude Lachmer'd want to show off. He'll want to fight under the bright lights, with a lot of folks watchin' him."

BACK at the Granton ranch, Granton thought that he would look in upon Riley before he went to bed, and see if he was asleep. He found the door locked, which was unusual.

Granton called a man to him, sent him outside and around to the window. He got through and unlocked the door.

"He ain't here! Bed ain't been slept in!"

Granton entered with a lamp, holding it high and throwing the light all around the room.

"And the window was open all the way up," the cowpuncher added.

Betty heard them, and came hurrying from her own room, fearing that Riley had grown worse. It was Betty who found the note.

"Dad!" she cried. "Read this! That's where he's gone. Into town, to fight that man! Please! See if the horses are gone. See if Esteban is gone, too. Oh, dad! He—he'll be killed!"

"And would you care, honey?" her father asked.

She lifted her face, and he read her eyes. A moment later, John Granton was bellowing orders.

The big ranch bell clanged, and men tumbled out of their bunks and into their clothes. Other men came running to make reports.

Riley's horse was gone, and another also. Esteban could not be found. One of the men said he had heard somebody riding down the lane.

"Dad!" Betty begged.

The punchers were gathered around the veranda steps, and the sheriff and some of his deputies came hurrying from the bunkhouse. Granton looked down at them all.

"Today Riley got an insulting letter from that outlaw, Dude Lachmer," Granton said. "He said Riley was faking about being sick, was afraid to come in and fight him. And Riley's gone in to fight. Saddle up, some of you. Get my horse ready. We'll ride to Mesaville, and see that he gets a square deal!"

"Saddle my black!" Betty cried to one of the men. She rushed back into the house to dress in riding clothes.

"I think I'll take a hand in this here game myself," the sheriff said. "I ain't had a wild night ride for quite a spell. And if anything happens to Dan Riley—then I want a few words with Dude Lachmer!"

CHAPTER XIV

Six-Gun Showdown

OUT of the lane and into the dusty road the riders of the Granton outfit swept through the moonlight, headed by John Granton and his daughter, the sheriff and some of his deputies riding with them.

Riley and Esteban had started a long time before them, but had ridden slowly. And these did not spare horseflesh in their mad chase. At the head of the flying cavalcade, Betty Granton urged her big black to better speed, and her father kept pace with her. Gradually, they drew away from the others.

Into the little pass they went, after a time, to slow down because of the treacherous footing. Here they bunched together again. And when they emerged they were off once more on a wild chase, with Betty and her father leading the way.

Came the time when they could see the lights of the town in the distance. The horses were winded now, and the going was slower. Betty and her father drew ahead of the others again, and, when they came to the last steep hill, had a chance to talk as their mounts walked.

"Maybe you'd better hang back, Betty," Granton said. "It might not be a nice sight for a girl."

"But I want to know, dad," she told him.

"I reckon we'll find out soon enough, if anything's happened."

"But he's wounded—he's sick. He was so weak yesterday that he staggered when he went out on the porch."

"I reckon that note upset him," Granton said. "It was a kind of challenge to his manhood, and he felt he had to answer it. Maybe you haven't anything to worry about. But I can't understand you. You've never paid much attention to men. Dan Riley comes along, and without hardly knowing him—"

"I can't explain it myself, dad," she interrupted.

The sheriff rode up to them. "The men are scattered, so we can go ahead, Granton," he said. "Big crowd at the cantina. Bunch of smugglers passin' through, I reckon. We might pick up somethin' good this trip, seein' as how it wasn't prearranged, and hence tipped off.

"I reckon Miss Betty'd better stay behind a bit," the sheriff said. "Might get in the way and get hurt, if there's any lead flying around. If I hadn't promised Dan Riley, I'd hunt out that Dude Lachmer and take him in myself. But Riley's entitled to his chance."

"What chance has he—a weak, sick man?" Betty cried at him.

"I've seen him shoot," said the sheriff. "Dan Riley sick is a lot better shot than most men well. And then—"

He stopped and glanced ahead. The din in the cantina had died down abruptly. The sheriff knew the symptoms. He kicked his horse with the spurs.

A shot rang out, another—and others. Then there was a chorus of wild yells.

The sheriff dashed ahead, shrieking commands to some of the men nearest him. Granton pounded along behind, with Betty at his side. From every direction, Granton ranch punchers and deputies converged upon the cantina of Pablo Lopez . . . .

Riley and Esteban had ridden slowly out of the darkness beside the blacksmith shop and started across the plaza.

"Señor, I have a thought," Esteban said. "You ride over by the stable and remain there in your saddle for a time. Rest, and prepare yourself."

"I'm ready now, Esteban."

"Please allow me to go to the cantina first alone. It is not only Dude Lachmer of whom I am thinking. But it might be a good thing to spy out the land. Others may be ready to play a hand in the game, señor. I would not put it past them. You have ruined their plans, and possibly they have sworn to remove you."

"Think they've planned somethin' like that?"

"That note might have been but a decoy, señor. You do not know Lachmer's handwriting. Or, he may have sent the note—and have men ready to shoot you down."

"It's true that they're an ambushin' gang," Riley admitted. "Go ahead, Esteban, if it'll please you any. Spy out the land. I'll wait over by the stable."

Riley rode away through the shadows, came to the stable wall, and stopped his mount in the darkness there. He saw Don Esteban stop at the end of the crowded hitch rail and find a place to tie up his horse.

Esteban slapped the trail dust from his clothes, removed his riding gauntlets and tucked them into his belt, and rubbed his fingers briskly to get the stiffness out of them. Then he hitched up his chaps and went slowly to the cantina door.

TONIGHT the place was thronged with men off the trail, and with strangers regarding whom Esteban knew nothing and could guess but little. They were three deep at the bar, and all the games were going. The piano was being punished. Some of the cantina girls were dancing.

Esteban stepped inside the door and stood to one side, pretending to be busy with the manufacture of a cigarette. Over the cupped hands which held the flaming match, he glanced around the big room.

Almost immediately he saw Pete Drake, his left arm in a sling because of the wounded shoulder Riley had given him, talking to one of his close friends. Several of Drake's cronies were scattered through the crowd, glancing frequently at the door.

Down by the middle of the bar, there was a sudden gale of laughter, and Esteban glanced that way quickly. He saw a man he supposed was Dude Lachmer—a young, good-looking man dressed in the height of fashion. His clothes were fine, and his boots finer.

But he wanted to be sure this was Dude Lachmer. So he began working through the jostling crowd, trying to avoid attracting attention, and approaching the man who had laughed.

He got close to him, tried to get nearer, hoping that somebody would call him by name. The throng parted suddenly, and Dude Lachmer caught sight of Esteban staring at him.

"Hello, Goggle-eyes!" Lachmer cried. "Who are you lookin' at?"

His right hand shot out and grasped the collar of Esteban's coat. He jerked Esteban to him, breast to breast, and glared down into his eyes. Then he released him a little, and laughed.

"Who are you, fat boy?" he asked.

"Señor, I am Don Esteban Marcos—"

"A don, huh?" Lachmer cried, laughing again. "A fat one!"

"Please to let me go, señor," Esteban said.

"Why were you standin' there and starin' at me? Anything funny about me?" Lachmer demanded. "Feel like laughin'?"

"I did not mean to stare," Esteban said. "I would not be so rude."

"I can tell you who he is, Lachmer," a voice called. Pete Drake thrust his way through the crowd. "He's hooked up with Dan Riley. Rides around with him all the time. Prob'ly in here now spyin' for him."

"So!" Dude Lachmer's eyes grew narrow and seemed to burn. His mouth became a thin, straight line. The expression of the killer came into his face. "Riley's man, huh? That right?"

"Señor Lachmer, I am not Señor Riley's man. He is my friend, and I am his."

Dude Lachmer whipped out his gun and thrust the muzzle of it against Esteban's breast. Some there turned their faces away quickly. Cantina girls gave cries of pity, and covered their faces with their hands. Men resented it, but did not have the courage to interfere.

"Hombre," Dude Lachmer said, "are you still sayin' that you're proud to be Dan Riley's friend?"

Esteban opened his eyes wide, then closed them. His lips moved silently, and then: "I am proud, señor, to be the friend of Dan Riley!" he said.

Duke Lachmer returned his gun to its holster. He released Don Esteban and stepped back.

"I wish to heaven I had a friend like you," he said. "Now, if you're Riley's friend, get the hell away from me! Hurry, before I change my mind!"

Esteban walked away through the crowd, his body erect and his eyes shining. But whether they were shining with fear or pride, no man could tell. He stopped in the doorway. Calmly, he made a cigarette and lighted it. The din had broken out behind him again.

Somebody touched him on the shoulder, and he turned slowly to find Pete Drake at his elbow.

"Where's Riley?" Drake asked.

"Why do you not seek him out yourself, señor?" Esteban asked. "Why not do so openly, instead of sneaking up to the window of his room and trying to murder him in his bed, as you did the other night?"

"Why, you—you—! You dare stand there and talk to me like that?" Drake screeched.

"Why not, señor?" Don Esteban asked. "Can it be that you think I fear you?"

NOW there was dead silence in that end of the room. Those who had heard expected a roar of rage to come from the throat of Pete Drake, expected him to whip out his gun and empty its contents into Esteban's breast.

Drake seemed stunned for a moment. His hand was resting against Esteban's arm, and now Esteban reached up and brushed it off. There was dignity in the gesture.

"You—you—" Drake sputtered.

"You annoy me, señor," Esteban said. "Your breath is foul with stale liquor and tobacco, and the medicine on your shoulder nauseates me. There is a horse trough, señor, behind the blacksmith shop. It is my suggestion that you use it."

Somebody in the crowd snickered. Pete Drake saw red. This time, he grasped Esteban and hurled him back against the wall, and followed with his own body so swiftly that Esteban had no chance to draw a weapon.

But Drake went no further. His arm was gripped as though by a vise, and he was whirled around forcibly himself, to find the beady eyes of Dude Lachmer boring into his.

"That's enough!" Lachmer said. "You got what was comin' to you, Drake. Hands off this hombre, or you'll answer to me."

"If he's a friend of yours—" Drake said, the suggestion of a sneer in his voice.

"He's a friend of Dan Riley. And I'm goin' to kill Riley as soon as I set eyes on him, or he'll kill me. That's pretty well understood. But our fight is with Dan Riley, and not with his friends unless they take a hand. Understand?"

Drake's face paled beneath that beady glare, and he backed away. Don Esteban went on through the door and out into the night. The crowd resumed its hilarity.

Lachmer left Drake and made his way through the crowd to the middle of the bar again. Standing there, he could watch the entire room in the big mirror on the back bar. He was a distance from the front and rear doors. It was a position of advantage.

Moreover, he had a man watching each door. He would know the moment Dan Riley came into the cantina. There would be no undue advantage for Riley.

Dude Lachmer was a peculiar individual none could understand. He had killed ruthlessly when the slaying could have been avoided, and then had risked his life in behalf of a man of whom he knew nothing. He was a traitor to his associates at times, yet admired loyalty in others. And he was a fatalist.

Now he beckoned Pablo Lopez to him, and bent over the bar.

"A drink of your finest private stock, Lopez," he ordered.

"Certainly, señor!" Lopez got a bottle from beneath the bar.

Dude Lachmer tossed a gold coin down upon the table. "Keep it, Lopez, but do not mix it with the others just yet."

"Señor?"

"It will be a luck piece, if anything happens to me tonight. The last coin I spent—understand? A blood coin!"

"Señor!" There was horror in Lopez's voice now.

Lachmer laughed. "Why shiver?" he asked. "What is to happen, will happen. It is on the cards. And the little señorita—the delicious Carmelita—she doesn't like me. Don't blame her a bit for that, Lopez. But if anything happens, buy her something to remember me by, out of the gold piece. It'll bring her good luck, too."

"Do not talk so, señor," Lopez begged. "It is terrible to have such things happen in my cantina. The floor will be drenched with blood."

"Pay some peon to clean it up—out of the gold piece," Lachmer said, laughing again. "First thing you know, you won't have any of the gold piece left for yourself. Anyhow, if I pass out tonight, it'll be in the way I want to go. Bancord and Whalen—they'll swing and kick on the gallows, I reckon. Nothing like that for Dude Lachmer!"

He tossed off the drink, saluted those around him with the empty glass, and smashed it into fragments against the floor.

"Dan Riley is coming!" somebody called.

CHAPTER XV

Renegades' Roundup

DON ESTEBAN MARCOS PULIDO, feeling every inch his name, had gone forth into the night and crossed to where Riley was waiting. He related what had occurred.

Riley got out of his saddle, and stretched himself while Esteban held the reins. He flexed his muscles, worked his hands. He snapped his six-gun out of its holster a few times, and brought the holster forward a little.

"Let's go, Esteban!" he said.

Side by side they walked across the corner of the plaza, Esteban leading Riley's horse. When they came to the hitch rail, they stopped, and Esteban tied the horse there.

"If anything happens to me, Esteban, the mount is yours," Riley said. "And if you don't treat him right, I'll come back and haunt you."

"Do not speak like that, señor, for the love of the saints—"

"Keep your head up!'

They went on toward the open door of the cantina, through which was pouring a medley of music, talk and laughter. Somebody saw them, and gave the alarm:

"Dan Riley is coming!"

There was an instant hush in the big room. Men moved swiftly, some to get back against the walls, some to leave by the rear door. The middle of the room was cleared.

Dude Lachmer remained standing alone in the middle of the bar, leaning upon it, surveying himself in the mirror. A cigarette drooped from a corner of his mouth. With hands that did not shake at all, he struck a match and ignited it, and puffed as though not concerned with anything in all the world.

Dan Riley stepped through the door, with Esteban close behind him. The latter went slowly aside and joined a group against the wall. Riley looked down the length of the room, scrutinizing the man he had come to get.

Lachmer puffed at the cigarette and continued to survey himself in the mirror. Both his hands were upon the bar, to show that he sought no unfair advantage. Here were two men about to try to kill each other, yet each trusted the other to be fair. Square gamblers for the biggest stakes of all!

Dan Riley backed against the wall, brought forth materials, and made a cigarette of his own. That was a gesture. All things must be equal, even to the chance of getting smoke in the eyes at the crucial moment. Nor did his hand shake when he struck a match and lighted the smoke.

Then, his arms swinging easily at his sides, Dan Riley started down the middle of the room. His eyes never left Lachmer now. He could hear men breathing heavily, heard some cantina girl give a dry sob.

"Lachmer!"

Riley spoke the word in an ordinary tone of voice.

"Howdy, Riley!" Lachmer said. "Been a long time since we saw each other, huh? I understand you've been doin' some runnin' around tryin' to find me."

"Yeah, a little."

"Was you wantin' to see me about anything in particular, Riley?"

"Little matter of murder, Lachmer. You're wanted. Half a dozen charges, if I'm rememberin' right."

"Uh-huh! You still a ranger?"

"Yeah! On special detached service, though. But everything's official."

"Just what are you goin' to do about it, Riley?"

"First thing, I'm askin' you to come peaceable, which is the law."

"I couldn't think of doin' that."

"I didn't suppose you would," Dan Riley told him. "Had to ask you, though."

"Sure! I understand."

Men in that big room were at the point of screaming. Why didn't they end it? How long were they going to toy with each other, each waiting for the other to make the first move?

"What happens, Riley, when I say I won't surrender?" Dude Lachmer asked.

"Then it's my job to take you, Lachmer, or—"

"Uh-huh! Well?"

"Whenever you're ready, Lachmer, go for your gun!"

Riley's voice changed as he said that. There was a ring in it. He bent forward a bit, and his arms ceased swinging at his sides, and seemed to become rigid.

Dude Lachmer turned slowly from the bar, moving his hands carefully until they were at his sides. Still cautious about taking an unfair advantage.

"Whenever you're ready, Lachmer!"

LIKE a marble statue, Dude Lachmer stood in the middle of the room a few feet from the bar. The ghost of a smile flashed across his face. And his right hand flashed to his holster.

Dan Riley swerved sharply to one side as he saw the move. Both guns barked, cracked again. Another crack—and a girl's scream!

Something had happened off to one side, but Riley did not look to see. Six gun still held ready he started a slow advance. Dude Lachmer had swayed forward slightly, and his gun hand had dropped. And now, with all his strength of will, he was trying to bring it up again. Inch by inch he lifted it.

But strength suddenly left him. His gun dropped from his nerveless fingers and clattered to the floor. Dude Lachmer half turned, collapsed. As he rolled over, the ghost of a smile was on his face again.

"Written . . . . on the cards . . . . " he said.

Then Dan Riley reeled back against the bar and dropped his own gun, and Esteban gave a cry and was the first to rush across the room toward him. He clutched Riley, held him up.

"Señor Dan! You are hurt?"

Riley turned and looked at him, swayed against him. "So weak," he muttered. "Shoulder—hurts."

"You could not see, Señor Dan, because you were watching Lachmer," Esteban whispered. "Drake tried to shoot you in the back. And Señorita Carmelita sprang before him."

"What?" Riley cried.

Then he looked across the room. Carmelita was stretched on the floor, her weeping father bending over her, the cantina girls hovering near.

Riley staggered toward them. "What—" he questioned again.

"And I shot the Señor Drake, straight between the eyes," Esteban added. "It was a very great pleasure, señor!"

Riley sensed what had happened now. He hurried forward as swiftly as his wobbly legs would carry him.

Carmelita opened her eyes, saw him, smiled at him a wan little smile.

"You poor kid!" Riley sobbed.

"Do not feel so badly, Señor Dan. I am happy to do it for you. And—Carmelita tells you this—the girl with the golden hair and blue eyes—she loves you. I see it in her face—that first day." . . . . Then there came a thunder of hoofs out in front of the cantina, and men were shouting to one another, and into the big room they rushed, the punchers and the sheriff's men. But they stopped abruptly at the scene they saw.

Dude Lachmer was dead with a smile on his face. Drake was stretched lifeless on the floor. And Carmelita Lopez was clasped in her father's arms, while Dan Riley knelt beside her.

Then Betty Granton rushed in and up to them. And she, too, stopped abruptly at the scene. She watched until Dan Riley got up and came toward her.

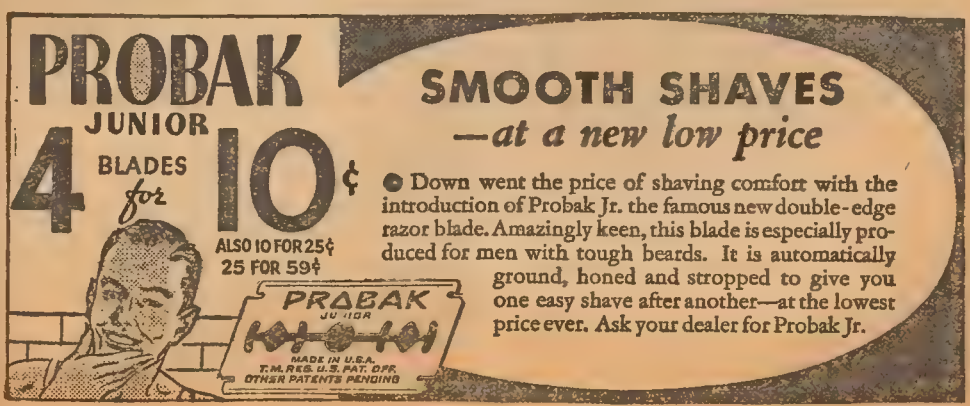
"Oh, Dan!" she said. "I was so afraid!"

"I—I'm all right, Betty. That poor kid—she saved my life. She atoned, Betty, double over. And she told me somethin', and I want to tell you now, though maybe it don't seem right."

"What did she tell you, Dan?"

"She said you loved me—that she'd seen it in your face the day I stopped your horse."

Betty Granton hung her head a bit. "A woman always knows such things, Dan," she said.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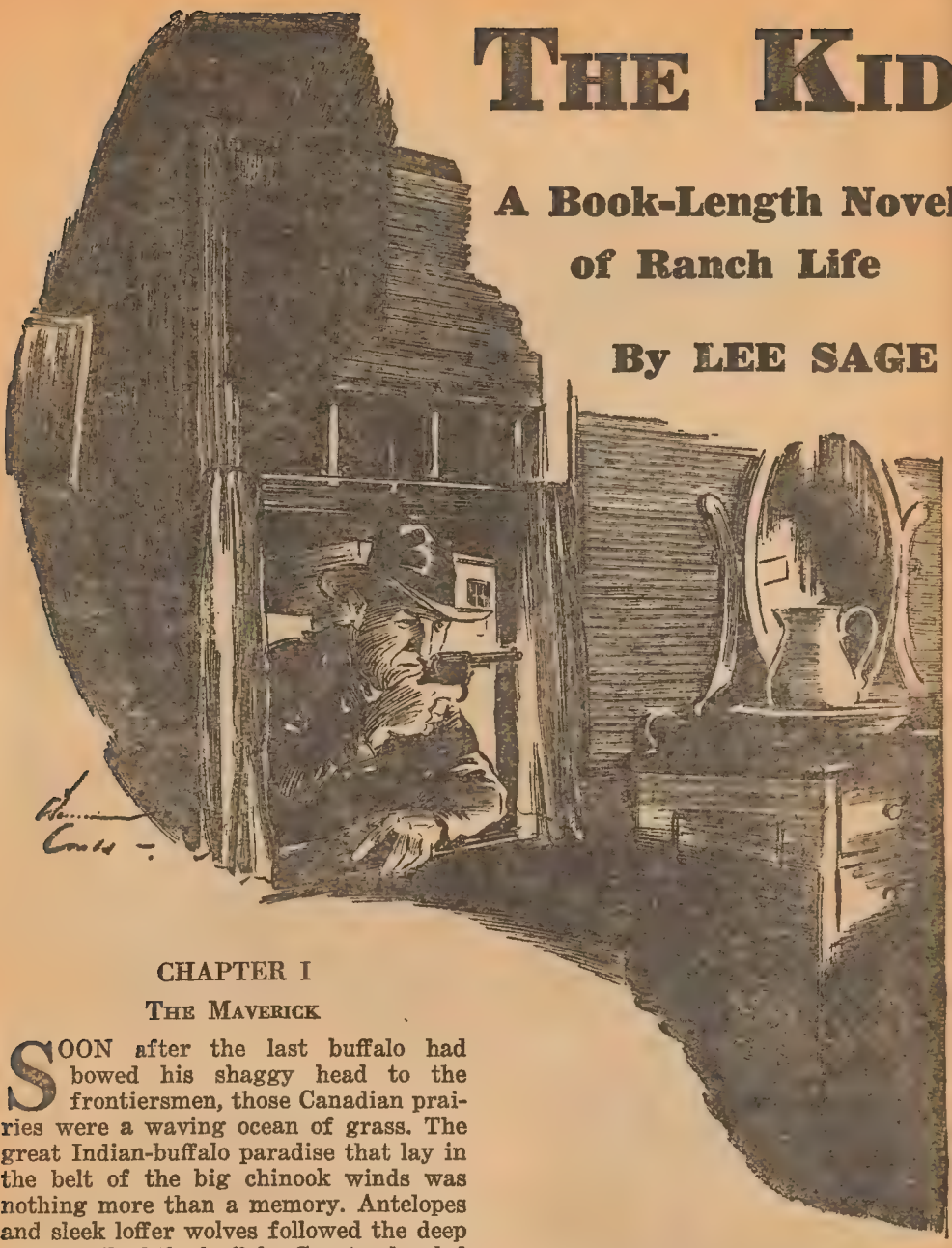
THE KID

A Book-Length Novel of Ranch Life

By LEE SAGE



CHAPTER I

THE MAVERICK

SOON after the last buffalo had bowed his shaggy head to the frontiersmen, those Canadian prairies were a waving ocean of grass. The great Indian-buffalo paradise that lay in the belt of the big chinook winds was nothing more than a memory. Antelopes and sleek loffer wolves followed the deep worn trail of the buffalo. Coyotes howled on the ridges, greasy badgers snarled as they backed into their dens and kid foxes hid up along the river brakes.

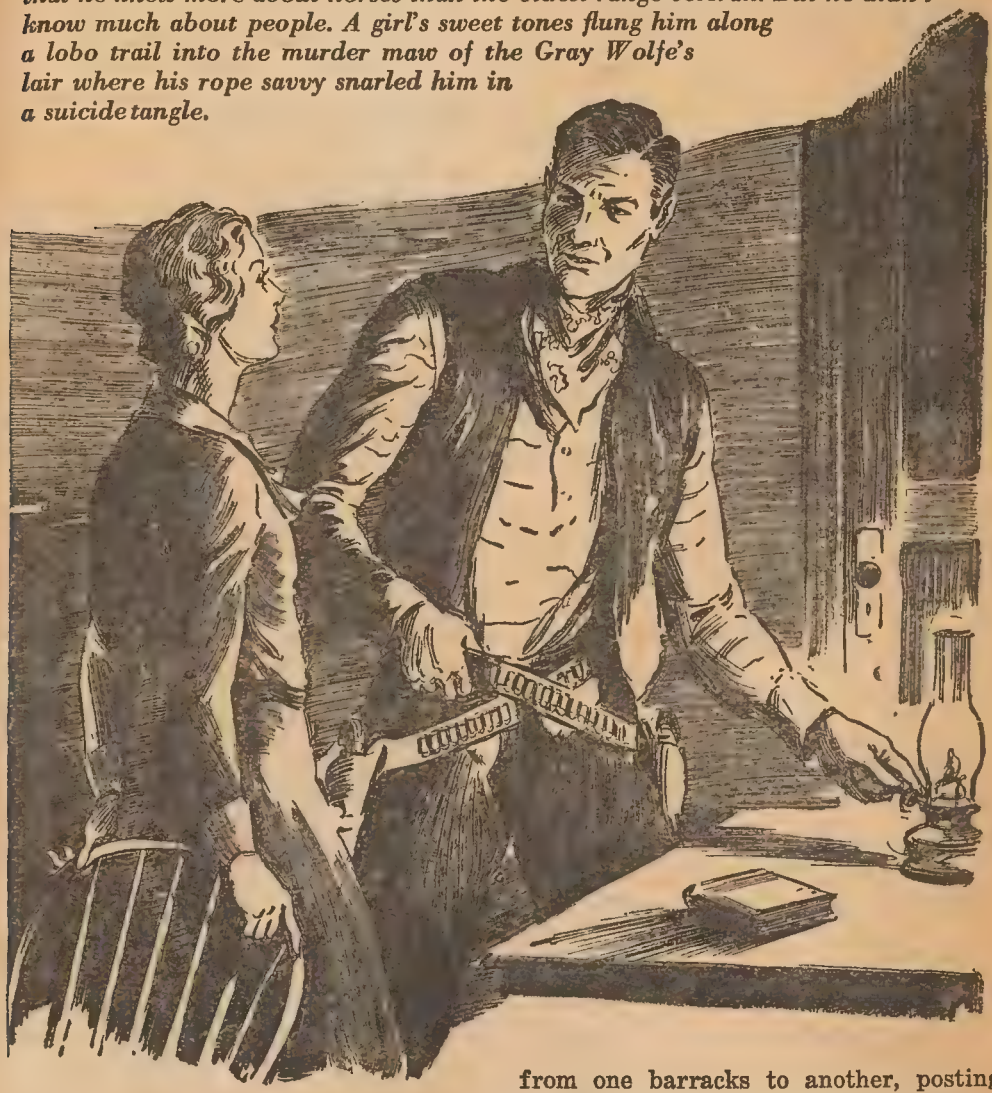
It was a powerful country and stronger than the life that sought it. When the frozen clutch of winter grabbed the prairie, blizzards whistled and tore across it, drifting the snow into ridges, until the silent span was like a great crinkled washboard. Whirling winds powdered the dry snow and drove it mercilessly into the deepest dens of life that dug in for the long winter.

When the soft chinook winds from the southwest stole in, they unlocked the land's plenty. Spring was on the break! The snow melted from the drifts and ran in streams, forming thousands of lakes till they overflowed their outlets and plunged into narrow coulees.

The whole country was a moving mass of mushy snow and water, sliding to the

FROM NOWHERE

He had no name. He came from nowhere. Yet this hunger-lean maverick talked himself into a job roping gophers. And on the Rocking H outfit, he proved that he knew more about horses than the oldest range veteran. But he didn't know much about people. A girl's sweet tones flung him along a lobo trail into the murder maw of the Gray Wolfe's lair where his rope savvy snarled him in a suicide tangle.



rivers. Then howling winds swept the country for days before summer came burning down with eighteen hours of sunshine. Then all ripened life hung heavy for gathering in the fall.

The last of the dead buffalo carcasses were dried when a few big ranchers began to squat around, here and there. The Mounted Police ran their scarlet patrol from one barracks to another, posting their vigilance to the farthest outposts of humanity.

The first ranchers that settled were men of means and they started in a big way—different from the Southern pioneers, who squatted on small ranches, fought the Indian and tramped out the sagebrush.

Hank Hyde was among them. He had leaked out from the East in his prime

and set up the Rocking H ranch twenty miles north of Belly River and a hundred miles west and north of the town of Medicine Hat. Something like ten thousand horses carried Hank Hyde's Rocking H brand on the left thigh. Uncounted cows wore it on the left ribs.

The Rocking H ranch had stood among the first and age had marked her with plenty of good will and prosperity. Long rows of warm bunkhouses, sheds and barns stood on the north side of the big plank corrals that at times held thousands of head of stock. Wagon loads of supplies bought in Medicine Hat rolled constantly across the prairie to the ample commissary against the ranch house where cowpunchers could draw Levi Strauss overalls and tobacco without a signature.

Seen from a distance, the two huge barns loomed up red and bulky—outstraddling the two-story ranch house that topped a knoll to the west of them. It was a white rambling building, with wide porches and windows, a landmark of roaring hospitality and good nature.

Cowboys rode days out of their way to meet Hank Hyde, who had more cowpunchers than any two outfits on the range. Men would rather work for him than sleep for the other outfits. He paid off in cold cash and always had plenty of it. Through the winter his chuck doors were open to all humanity. The saying among them was that HH stood for Hired Hands and Hard Horses—but it was Hank Hyde they remembered.

He was a tall hearty man with black hair and a wind-scorched face. His arms swung as free as the Canadian wind. His lips had grown in the shape of a smile and his dark eyes read honesty into everyone. There was a saying on the prairie that any man that double-crossed Hank Hyde jobbed himself. Hank's wife and small daughter Ann were the only interests that came before his cowboys. Mrs. Hyde had nursed many a cowboy through long sicknesses and broken bones, mothering him to health again.

The outfit ran four roundups each year. They were the saddle horse roundup in early spring, the range horse roundup in late spring, the branding roundup of cattle in midsummer, and the beef roundup in the early fall. In the winter ranch hands scattered hay to the poor stock which had been thrown in the pastures, while cowboys mended their tack, swapped yarns and horses, slept and ate through the short days and long nights.

The large outfits always sent a man to ride with every roundup to represent the owners and pick up their straying stock as it was gathered. They were called "reps" and were heartily welcomed, once their bed was flopped down on a roundup. The roundup boss handled them the same as his own men. These exchanges bound the whole range together into a big friendly group.

THE punchers lounged on their beds at night, swapped yarns and talked of the passing of winter—where they went and what happened—strange characters and brands they had seen in their travels. Others uncoiled stories of Paul Bunyan, the big fellow, who had a soup kettle so big that a man would jump in a gasoline launch, sail out and harpoon the dumplings—and who had to keep a four-horse team hauling ink to write out his time checks.

Then there was the passing of the Blue Ox that was thirty-two feet between the eyes, and the year of the Blue Snow when the elephants roosted in gooseberry bushes, and other tales of Western folk lore that would raise the hair on a currycomb.

When the stock was within a day's ride of the ranch, the time for the big cut took place. The saddle horses and work stock were taken in and the range stuff kicked loose to fatten on the spring grass.

When later the big horse roundup came off, the chuck wagon pulled out full steam ahead and bunches of cowpunchers rode hard through the rain and slush of late spring. After this followed the calf-branding roundup. By this time the stock was all fat, and big waspy calves bucked and played across the prairies. They were rounded up with their mothers; and while the sun scorched the cowboys, the irons burnt the calves.

When they were jarred loose, the big chuck wagon and saddle horse string pulled back to the headquarters, to rest up for the roaring beef roundup, when thousands of three- and four-year-old steers were gathered and crowded onto the market.

The puncher hated the last one most. Long days in the saddle had commenced

to tear him down. The rain blew from the northwest and light skiffs of snow whitened the prairies. The cowpuncher cussed as he pulled pants on his frozen legs and tugged at his stiff boots. Old saddle horses were full of hell on the cold mornings with humps in their backs, rearing to buck every chance they got. They too were looking for the long rest that brings again the glorious Canadian springtime. The rolling green prairie hummed with new life and the Rocking H ranch was all a hustle. Riders were blowing in from the four points of the wind.

The saddle horse roundup was near the end; and the cowboys made hard rides from the main ranch, throwing the saddle stuff in the big ranch pastures and cutting the range stuff free again. The boys started on the circle at daylight and few reached home before dark. It was a booming, high time and the punchers whistled as they worked.

Hank Hyde was on deck for every bunch that came in. He gave them a close inspection, and any old saddle horse that had served a good term he cut out and turned back to free grass. He loved them. They were well-reined, large, snorty fellows and they rocked off plenty of riders.

Jim Coon, better known as "Red Coon" the country over, was Hyde's foreman and a tophand. He rated first among the bronc peelers; sixty miles a day wouldn't even warm his saddle. He could read almost impossible brands in one glance and remember them till the average fellow died of old age. Those were the things that glued him to the Rocking H. Red Coon was short a lot of his best horses and he rode harder and chewed more tobacco each day, as the roundup drew to a close.

One morning Red Coon corralled a bunch of range mares and cut out two saddle horses, hallooing at Hank Hyde, who stood in the doorway of the house. Hank came to the corral and saw that Coon was glummer than usual.

They squatted on their boot heels against the corral fence. Coon informed him he was short a large number of good saddle stock and figured some of the horse rustlers hiding around the Sweet Grass Buttes could account for the leak.

Silence fell on the men. Hyde sucked a cigarette and scratched his bald spot. Red Coon made brands in the dirt and spat tobacco juice at a few pesky flies on the corral fence.

"Well," Hyde said at last, "them that has—must lose. Them that hain't got —can't."

"Glad you take it thetaway, Hyde," Coon said, relieved. "I've been powerful upset about it. I've been lookin' fer them to show up every day. We ain't got time to hunt any more."

"How about your men, Coon?"

"Runnin' full-handed. Most all the old fellers is back. I've turned down plenty of new ones."

Buzzing deer flies kept the horses milling in the corrals. The sun was about ten high and hot. An old cow-dog trotted from the house, sat down on his stump of a tail and wailed a couple of ancient barks towards the corral. Hyde smiled at the old-timer.

"That sure was a good dog in his day, but he's done his bit."

NEITHER man saw what the dog was barking at. A wisp of a boy, gaunt-bellied and lean-faced climbed over the corral fence and landed in front of them. His history began right there, as if he had sprouted up with the spring grass. Both men were taken aback.

"Well, boy, where you headed for?" Hyde asked.

"Ain't goin' no place—jest lookin' fer work."

His answer was quick and fearless.

"Well, you come to a mighty poor place," Red Coon put in. "We're overrun with men now. Besides, kids don't shine on this outfit. A feller spends half his time gittin' them up in the morning and the other half collectin' their saddle horses when they git piled off."

The boy's face dropped and he jammed his hands in his pockets.

"Well, you'd be surprised, old-timer! I don't reckon you got a horse on this outfit I can't ride."

At that Red Coon nearly fell over laughing.

"Every kid that ever joined this outfit has said the same thing, but damned if any of them could ever demonstrate as well as they could tell about it, settin' on a corral fence. How old are you, kid?"

"About sixteen."

Hyde protested. "Listen here, Coon, we all had to learn, and I'm bettin' you

was no tophand when you first started through the mill."

"Ye're right!" Coon growled and drowned another fly on the fence. "But I didn't hit the biggest outfit in the country to break me in."

"Everybody has to eat in this country," Hyde persisted. "Reckon we can find something for the kid to do."

"Fine—as long as you keep him off the horses and out of my way."

"Looky here, who owns this outfit, Coon, me or you?" Hyde scratched his bald spot.

"I don't know who owns it, but as long as I'm runnin' it—there'll be no kids!"

At that the boy in front of them sagged. A couple of gophers ran under the corral fence, fighting.

"What's your name, boy, and where'd you come from?" Hank Hyde asked pleasantly and his eyes softened as he watched the boy kicking the dirt with his run-over boot.

"Call me Dick. I come from over thar!" He gave his thumb a circular jerk that took in all points of the compass.

Hyde shook his head and laughed. That was enough! He knew the kid didn't aim to tell and he looked the boy over with a keener eye. There was silence, while Red Coon's tobacco took another roll, but his eyes were on the flies, not on the boy.

The boy was small and waspy. His hair was long and black and hung in a shaggy fringe beneath his loppy hat. A half smiling mouth offset the squareness of his jaw. The brown eyes were large and flashed like sharpened flints. His body was as shifty as a Cree Indian's, but no Indian showed in his unusual face.

Two he-gophers ran under the corral fence and fell in a clinch right in front of the three. Hyde cursed and hurled a branding iron—upsetting the pair of them.

"Damn the gophers!" he said. "This country's just walking off with them. They're movin' in like a landslide to git the grain split round the place. They're under the granaries, in the barns and chawin' hell out of the saddle leather. Say, Dick, that gives me an idee! Do you suppose you'd like a job killin' off the gophers round the place?"

A pleased smile twitched a bit at the corners of the boy's mouth and his hands came out of his pockets.

"Sure—if there's 'nough money in it. What d'you pay?"

"Well, I'll tell you!" Hank studied a minute. "I'll give you five cents apiece and yer board; and yer job's here as long as the gophers is and I don't reckon you'll be workin' yourself out right soon."

Dick pulled a long rawhide string from the pocket of his torn overalls. Red Coon snorted out loud.

"Hey, goofus! What you goin' to do? Rope them air gophers? You'll break this outfit at five cents a head!"

But Dick thumbed his nose at Coon and trotted after a fat gopher as it flicked its tail and whistled before it dove down its hole. Dick spread the loop over the hole backed off to the end of the string and lay belly-down on the ground. Hyde and Coon froze to their spot, watching the performance.

In about two minutes the gopher stuck his head up and whistled. Dick jerked the string. It tightened around the gopher's neck. He whirled it above his head and plunked it on the ground. The gopher kicked and was finished. Hank Hyde held his stomach and roared, while Coon shifted his tobacco to the other side and covered three flies with one aim.

"There's my first five, old hand," Dick yelled. "If the gophers hold out—I'll be worth a heap of money!"

Coon raised and looked at the boss.

"Say, Hyde, do you intend to pay fer a performance like that?"

"Leave the kid alone, Coon! He's a willin' little devil, and if I ain't mistaken he's had to work for all he's put under his belt in this world. He ain't got clothes enough to pad a crutch. Somebody has to give him a hand. You never had much more yourself when you first come here—and I know damn well you couldn't rope a gopher!"

"The hell!" Coon started, then choked down. "Well—it's your business, Hyde, but I want him to keep out of my way."

DICK was tired when night came and he ate a heavy supper. As a boy and a new hand he attracted much attention at the supper table.

"Coon, what's your new man's name?" asked one of the boys.

"I don't know what you'd call him. Hyde's Specialty, I guess," Coon drawled.

"He's started a gopher roundup in this country!"

"Is that what he was doin' plastered out on the sidehill? How many gophers you catch today, kid?" another asked.

"Jest even to seventy-five!" Dick said and went on with his dinner.

"Now tell a bigger one!" Coon put in. "Where's the hides?"

"I didn't keep 'em!"

"I thought maybe Hank Hyde would have you tannin' him a gopher hide to make him another one of them South African raccoon coats. How you keepin' count?" Coon pushed, seeing a chance for a bit of fun. "Yer word ain't no good round here when you're collectin' five cents a head!"

The cowpunchers snorted. Hank Hyde looked a bit sheepish as the color crept into the boy's face. Dick raised up, shoved his hand in his pocket and pulled out two handfuls of fuzzy gopher tails that he heaped on the table beside him.

"Thar they be!" Dick said with a flourish.

The laugh was on the table. Hank Hyde held his belly, while the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Take that one, Coon," he said. "'Bout time you lay off that kid!"

"Hell! He could get them gopher tails anywheres!" Coon growled.

"Well, you jest try it then!" Dick spunked up. "I think Hyde will give you five cents a head the same as he does me. It's easier to kill 'em and take 'em off than it would be to turn 'em loose with their tails gone. And as fer countin' them! Have you ever seen any two-tailed gophers around the country? If you do—let me know. They're worth ten cents apiece!"

A roar of applause greeted the kid's comeback.

"That's right, sonny," Hyde put in, "you sure know your gopher!"

"Well, three seventy-five is more than I'm gettin' every day!" Coon grouched.

"You're paid all you're worth!" Hyde laughed good-naturedly. "An' bein' you're the hirin' and firin' man on this outfit you're goin' to do the bookkeepin' on them gopher tails and pay that kid his cash every night!"

That burnt Coon up! A roar of laughter shook the mess house.

"Are you goin' to take the kid's word on it or are you goin' to count the tails, Coon?" someone yelled.

Coon shelled the money from his pocket, paid off the kid and ordered him to remove himself and the gopher tails from the supper table, telling him hereafter he could deliver the tails outside. Dick tamped the Canadian dollar bills in his pocket and went whistling to his bunk.

The next morning before the crack of dawn the day-herder, called a jingler in the north and a horsewrangler in the south, struck the floor through his pants legs, slapped on his hat and went into his boots on a run for the door. Dick raised and sized up the bunkhouse as he rolled out. It was queer for him to be under a roof.

The building was made of lumber, a hundred feet long and twenty feet wide. Double-decked bunks were built along the north wall. Dim streaks of light showed through the big windows on the south side and lit the room enough for Dick to look with wonder down the long row of bunks. Cowpunchers slept soundly, snoring in every way imaginable.

In front of each tier of bunks was a small table covered with playing cards, jackknives, Bull Durham, saddle oil and chewing tobacco. On the opposite wall hung each cowboy's best duds—what few he had. There were warbags covered with brands from every part of the world, hackamores, bridles and parts of saddles, along with pet lariat ropes and rifles. Here and there crudely tanned hides of fur were laid on the floor.

Dick's heart swelled a bit as he thought that he was part of this huge concern which slept more men than he'd ever seen bunched together for a single snore. He pulled his three one-dollar bills from his pocket and counted them several times, looked at his shabby clothes, then at the good ones hanging on the wall. A couple of shrill whistles and a wild Indian war whoop burst from him.

"Shut up—and git out!" a dozen burly voices bellowed.

Dick bolted out of the door, dodging a shower of boots and pillows. He was just in time to see the jingler mount his horse and head for the pasture, to bring in the saddle horses for the day's work. It was known as the saddle horse cavvy—or remuda, by the more fancy cowhands.

The air was sharp. Gray streaks shot above the eastern skyline and a morning star hung half-mast and blue. In the distance a lone coyote yipped. The prairie birds whistled half-notes. The air was sweet with the odors of life which night had released. Dick heard the stallions nicker and paw against the plank pens for their morning's feed. He liked them. They meant power and life to him. His sense of possession widened with the solitary strength of the new morning. He ran to look them over.

CHAPTER II

An Ornery Cayuse

MODOCK, a big black imported Percheron stallion, poked his head out of the feed hole in his fence. Dick stuck out his hand to pet him. The stallion flattened his ears, peeled back his lips and snapped at Dick, lunging against the fence. It creaked as though it would break in two. Dick climbed on top of the fence, just out of the animal's reach, and commenced to tease him.

At the same time from an open east window on the second floor of the ranch house, Hank Hyde stood sucking in every bit of the beautiful morning, his eyes following the long lines of his fences that marked his pastures, admiring the buildings that gave rest and shelter to his men and stock. It was a regular ceremony with him. He never missed it—the beauty of that first hour of daylight that gave to him its open promise and the dream of what man could do.

His eyes were drawn down to something on the corral fence. He stretched his neck and looked close before he recognized Dick running the full length of the top planks, jumping squeewampus across the corners. Round and round he went. The stallion raced after him on the inside of the pen, squealing and rearing. Each time Dick outdodged him.

Hank Hyde's Adam's apple turned a somersault. If the boy fell he would be trampled to pieces. Modock was the meanest stallion on the place, both a man and horse killer, but one of the most valuable breed animals in the whole country.

Hyde dared not holler to the boy for fear he'd stop one second too long and the stallion would grab him and eat him up. The boy had the balance of a monkey. He was more sure-footed than a tight-rope walker, and held his balance without using his arms. Hyde had never seen his equal. He wondered if the lad was walking in his sleep. He couldn't imagine skill such as Dick was showing belonging to a human being in his right senses.

Hank Hyde jumped into his clothes and ran like hell for the pen. As Dick came along towards him, Hyde jumped up and jerked him down in his arms. Dick went on with the fight, struggling to get loose, battering Hyde with his fists.

"Wake up, you young monkey!" Hyde yelled.

"I ain't snorin'!" Dick snapped back; then he recognized the boss and pocketed his fists. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hyde. I didn't think a little teasin' would spoil that black devil. He's got plenty of fight. Gosh! he's a beaut!"

Hyde laughed with relief at the boy's enthusiasm.

"He sure is! You can't spoil him any—but you'd be spoilt plenty if he ever grabbed you. There hasn't been a man near that horse for two years. The stable boy packs his water to him. There ain't but two men on the place who'll open the gate to turn him into the corral with the brood mares. He killed two men when he wasn't half as bad as he is now—but one of his colts is worth two of the others. He's both my pride and my plague. Don't never do that again!" Hyde finished sternly. "I don't want you killed."

"All right, sir. I won't worry you—honest! It's the first time I ever had anyone give a darn about what might git me!"

Hyde looked at the fresh young face, rested with its animal sleep. He admired the vigor of it and was touched with the response he had drawn from the boy. He pulled his coat shut against the cool breeze. Red flames shot upward in the east, touching the wrinkled wind clouds. The new day was as fresh as the ragged youth that stood in front of him.

"Well, son," he said with gentle humor, "you'd better find yourself a cat to tease. You beat your gophers out of bed this morning."

Dick didn't answer. Just looked funny and walked off. Hyde watched him and shook his head. He was puzzled. Such action and balance! He had it. Art McKacney, the greatest rider in all history,

had pulled just such stunts as that and got away with them. Hyde snickered to himself. Maybe the Rocking H had fallen heir to something. Red Coon had better look to his onions, or some day that kid would ride him down! Hyde was tickled plumb through.

Before the sun had sucked the heavy dew from the grass, Dick had several gophers to his credit. He cursed his job as the cowboys rode off the ranch, leaving him behind with a gopher snare in his hand. But he soon put the thought away with big promises to himself and took to his gophers again with renewed five-cent vengeance.

By noon he had looted every gopher hole near the barn and thrown confusion into the whole colony. The old bob-tailed ranch dog warmed up to the sport and hobbled around with him, giving the gophers their final shake.

When the dinner gong clanged from the chuck house, every rider within hearing filed in for the dinner. Dick could stand it no longer. The heel flies were worrying a bunch of range mares and they were trampling about in the corral. Dick slipped to the high board fence and peaked through. Red Coon and dinner were forgot! On top he went with a leap. He walked along the top plank, his eyes glued on the bunch of horses milling beneath him, looking for one to land on.

AT the dinner table the hands were rubbing Hyde up one side and down the other about the starting of his gopher roundup. Hank looked around suddenly.

"Where's Dick?" he asked.

"Who do you mean—Gopher Dick? That's the boy's handle from now on!" they bellowed. The boss slipped out to call the boy.

A cloud of dust was rising from the corral. Hyde made for it. The sight he saw sent him waddling back to the chuck house as fast as his stiff legs could take him. He gave the boys the high sign and motioned them to keep quiet as they lined up against the corral fence just in time.

Dick was sitting on a mangy mare one hand full of mane and the other one fanning her ears with his hat. She cut out from the bunch, bucked across the corral and began to uncoil. Dick had forgotten Red Coon and caution! Every time she hit the ground he kicked her and squealed.

"By gawd! I never seen the likes of that kid!" Hyde chuckled.

The mare turned back into the frightened bunch, which milled around the corral, kicking at her and trying to keep out of her way, but she tore into them head on. All but one broke free and ran to the far corner. The mangy mare came broadsides of it and stopped.

Both animals were snorting, their muscles quivering from fright, their eyes bulging and angry. Dick saw his chance. He reached over and grabbed the mane on the other horse and landed midships of him with one flop.

"I'll be damned!" Hyde exclaimed. "That kid's a freak—a ridin' fool!"

And he *was* riding! The new horse had dropped his head, run to the open space in the corral and was bucking and squealing like a wildcat. Dick yelled. He was in the middle of his horse heaven and he unwound every twist the horse's ancestry had left in him. The cowboys' mouths gaped wide open. Such riding was new to that range where big horses were respected.

When the horse threw up his head and went into a sulk, Dick looked up for the first time at the heads of a dozen cowpunchers poked above the fence. His eyes stopped on Coon's face, red with anger, his nostrils blowing like a bull's. That was enough!

Dick made one jump for freedom, cleared the fence in a husky scramble. Down across the prairie he ran like a scared coyote. Hyde yelled for him to come back, but he kept right on drifting. He was putting his gopher tails behind him. Changing ranges in nothing flat. Better he quit in a hurry. Red Coon's mad face had given him his final boo and he didn't aim to see it again.

The cowboys roared and yipped. They whacked each other's backs and held their bellies.

"Come on, Coon," Hyde yelled, as he made for a saddled horse and took in after Dick. "The Rocking H ain't sheddin' that kid!"

Red Coon's fresh quid of tobacco met a mighty curse as it rolled up and he swallowed them both whole. He dared not refuse to follow the boss.

Dick saw the race was no use. He ran for a pile of rocks on top of a knoll and grabbed up one in each hand. As the men rode up close to him, Dick clinched his

rocks and braced himself. He was standing his grounds like a she-bear fighting for her cubs. Hyde saw he meant to fight. He whispered to Coon.

"Pretend we're after him and see what he'll do!"

Coon dismounted with an ugly scowl on his face and started towards the boy. Dick drew back his rock.

"Lay off them rocks, you little whelp!" Coon bellowed.

"I will—when you take 'em away from me—and not before! You come another step and I'll knock yer can off!"

Red Coon snorted and went on. Dick let drive. Coon dodged the rock but before he could straighten up Dick hurled another one about the size of a baseball. It landed in the pit of Coon's belly and knocked the breath out of him. He went down in a heap. Dick had gone wild! He grabbed another rock and ran to pound Coon's head, but Hyde jumped his horse between them.

The kid let go at Hyde, but Hyde ducked it by sliding to the ground on the off side of his horse. He was busy right now keeping the horse between him and the rock-pelter. He wasted no time running up the peace flag of conversation.

"Slow up there—Dick! We ain't aimin' to hurt you. We come to offer you a promotion."

"I'm provin' that right now!" Dick backed off with a rock in his hand. "I don't take no stranger's word on nuthin'. You mean I don't have to catch gophers no more?"

"Just that, boy! You ride too darn good to waste yer time on gophers. But I'm warning you at the rate you've been going you won't be making so much money as a cowhand."

"It's doin' the thing you like to do that counts!" Dick's eyes were flashing. "Ninety dollars on gophers ain't as good as ten on horses to me. What job you got?"

"Wal—seein' you like to jump into the morning so early you can take the jingler's job."

"Hell! I had that job when I was a kid!"

Hyde burst out laughing.

"By gad! I believe it!"

"Well," Dick hesitated, looked sheepish, then gave his reserve rock a toss. "I'll take your old jinglin' job for a start!"

"You're on, boy!" Hyde grinned. He was glad he hadn't offered Dick the foreman's job. He'd probably have taken that and looked for more.

Coon was coming to his senses again, coughing and catching his breath in jerks.

"I'll skin that little wart-hog alive!" he snarled as he rolled to his feet and started towards the boy.

"No, you don't, Coon!" Hyde stopped him. "We wanted some fun—looks like you got it!"

There was nothing for Coon to do but agree to let the kid alone, but Dick knew that he was like the Indian and believed in "forgive and forget," but a damn long while remember!

CHAPTER III

Suicide Ride

THE days slipped by. Dick was vastly happy as jingler for the Rocking H at thirty round dollars a month. Gophers were no longer his specialty, but the name Gopher Dick was glued to him for life. He was holding down the out-cussingest job on the place, but he rated as a real hand.

If there were any snarls on the outfit, Dick came in for them. Red Coon didn't miss any opportunity, but he never got far with it. Dick was close-mouthed about the carryings on around the ranch and the punchers liked him for it. Good grub was filling him out and he always took the laughing side of a deal.

The boys never moved early in the mornings on the Rocking H ranch. "Sun-up was good enough!" Hank Hyde said. But on the roundups and outer camps they were on their way by good daylight. They never used a nightherder at the headquarters ranch, so it was up to Dick to round up and bring in the saddle horse cavvy. He'd land aboard his picket horse bareback with just a loop on its nose, his hat crumpled on one side of his head and buttoning his shirt as he went.

He could tell where the horses traveled during the night by the dark trails, where the dew was knocked off the tall grass. Had he waited till sunup the dew would be gone and he couldn't tell when he was on the outer circle of the horses. At times they traveled six or seven miles. The horse pasture covered thou-

sands of acres fenced with white cedar post and three wires.

After he had picked up the cavvy and got the punchers started off on their day's circle he lay around the place all day. He always kept an extra horse saddled; and when the cowhands wanted a fresh mount he fetched it to them with a grin. It gave him plenty of action, for there were never less than thirty cowboys to reckon with. There was nothing on the place he didn't have an eye for and an interest in.

One day, Modock, the big black stallion, broke down his pen and commenced charging around the yard, squealing and running. He felt mighty cagy. His appetite for saddlehorse flesh was whetted up. Every rider was out that day except Dick and Hank Hyde. Gopher Dick didn't like it. He wanted to corral him, but Hank Hyde insisted the horse would tire himself out and go back to his pen to feed, when he could be locked up.

Hyde had forgotten that his daughter Ann was out for a ride on old Pete, the family horse. The little girl was coming back through the pasture. She was a quarter of a mile from the house, and the pasture gate between her and the stallion was open. The stallion saw her before Hyde or Gopher Dick. His hanker for horseflesh had raised his rebellion to white fury. He threw up his head, widened his nostrils. His eyes popped as he trumpeted.

Hank Hyde went crazy! He yelled at the stallion to attract his attention, but the beast was deaf to the command of man. Hyde grabbed a pitchfork and ran for the pasture gate, the stallion blowing on his heels as he went. Hyde reached the gate first, but he had no time to shut it. He jumped in the middle of its awful opening, with the pitchfork raised high—yelling at the top of his voice.

The stallion charged him, his nostrils blood red. Hyde let him have the fork right over the head. The animal batted his eyes, backed up a bit, then rushed Hyde again, nearly trampling him down. Hyde stood his ground, as the maddened beast charged him again and again. Hank Hyde was battling for the life of his child with a fury that matched the stallion's—but he couldn't hold out much longer. He was worn out.

Dick made a flying leap to the middle of his horse. Around the corral he went, leaving a blue streak behind him, like the tail of a meteor—making straight for the girl through another gate.

It was closed! He poured the steel into his horse and put him over it with a foot to spare, just as the killer knocked Hyde to the ground. Both horses hit the pasture at the same time, making straight for the kid from opposite directions.

Dick was leaning ahead and whipping his horse with his rope, but the black killer was closing the gap. Dick saw his only chance was to cut in ahead and lure the stud off in another direction. It would cost him his saddle horse; but the little girl was still a hundred yards away, coming straight on—unaware of anything being wrong.

Dick jerked his horse to his haunches right in front of the stallion. He jumped from his horse, swinging his lariat in his hand. The killer made straight into them. One bolt and he knocked the saddle horse down. As it scrambled to its feet, the stallion socked his teeth into the back of its neck and commenced to shake. It was the most savage moment the Rocking H had ever known. Horseflesh, hair and hoofs were flying in all directions.

THE saddle horse swung loose a moment, whirled and kicked the black demon broadsides until his ribs thudded and his breath whistled out through his nostrils. He lost his balance and sidestepped into a badger hole, flopping to the ground on his side.

Dick sprang through the air like a monkey and landed on the stallion before he got to his feet. As he came up, Dick grabbed a handful of mane and commenced whipping the demon in the eyes with his lasso rope. The little girl had come up within fifty yards and stopped to watch the fun.

The stallion was trumpeting one blast after another, trying to shed Dick. He reared on his hind feet, whirled in the air, overtook Dick's horse and plowed him down again. This time the saddle horse stayed there.

That cleared the way. Old Pete was next. Dick yelled for the girl to jump and run for her life; but, being an only daughter, she paid no attention to orders. She thought Dick was putting on another one of his shows.

In another second it was too late, for the black killer squealed and arched his neck and started on a slow trot towards

old Pete. Pete sensed the squeal of the horse killer and made off across the prairie as hard as he could dig. The stallion reared again as Dick pounded at his eyes. His big round back was hard for Dick to clinch his legs over and he was busy staying with him.

Hank Hyde came running down the pasture with a rifle in his hands. But the children and horses were too badly mixed up to risk a shot. The stallion dropped his head out of the reach of Dick's coils and ran with it close to the ground. Dick froze to the mane with one hand.

Old Pete was heading for the barn, but he saw the stallion had the cut-off on him and he whirled and circled the other way. The killer cut through again on him. Hyde raised his rifle again—but was afraid. They were moving too fast and close. It was a hot moment for Hyde. He was helpless. Mrs. Hyde was down on her knees by the pasture gate, yelling her prayers to Almighty God to save them.

As the stallion made another bolt, Dick tossed a small loop down over his head and tightened it, trying to shut off the demon's wind. But Dick's weight was nothing against that bull neck. The stallion had raised his head and was running with it high. Dick threw another half-loop further down the rope and tossed it over the killer's ears. As it went down he jerked it tight across the bulging eyes.

Old Pete was making for the barn. It looked like a pile-up for two horses and two children—sure! Dick was hanging back on the rope like a killer himself. As they neared the gate, the stallion was stretching his neck to reach old Pete. Dick gave one more pull on the rope like a madman. It blinded Modock. He lost his course a second.

Old Pete ducked through the gate to safety and the stallion hit the corner post and turned a flip-flop. Dick jumped free of him as he went down. Modock landed on his back with his feet tangled in the wires of the fence. Old Pete made for the corral. Mrs. Hyde ran and slammed the big wooden gate not one second too soon.

The stallion was back on his feet and charging. He circled the corral, rearing on his hind feet and trying to climb the high fence that was cheating his fury out of a square meal. Maddened, he tore for the barn. Dick slammed the barn door behind him just as Hyde ran up from the pasture. He was winded—white as a Canadian winter and trembling like a leaf.

"Where in hell, boy, did you learn horses?" was all he said.

"Aw—I don't know—but I sure saved old Pete!"

"Old Pete—nuthin'! It was my kid I was fightin' for!"

"Gee, boss! I was fergettin' her. I was afraid old Pete was goin' to git his!"

"Say, what kind of a rascal are you, Dick? Wasn't human beings worth anything where you was raised?"

"Sure—in a sort of way they was. But they was always figgered to look out for themselves."

The old folks and daughter Ann held a hugging bee and Dick was sort of taken into the family reunion, to his utter shame.

That night at supper table Dick sat with his head ducked, while Hank Hyde related the story of the wild ride. Every puncher listened with a look of wonder on his face, for they knew Hyde wasn't handing them anything but the truth and they didn't know how to swallow it.

CHAPTER IV

Cow Country Law

THE big horse roundup: and June burned in with its long days and short nights. Daylight came at three—sunup at four. A man could still read a horse brand at nine o'clock in the evening.

The prairie was a blanket of green as far as the eye could see. Young antelope ran beside their mothers, pup coyotes and wolves played around their dens. Fearful mother ducks led their young broods to the middle of the lakes for safety.

The Rocking H was a buzzing stir, getting ready. The ranch hands, who spent their time in the summer putting up hay, building fences and repairing the large corrals, hauled the big chuck wagon alongside the commissary; equipped it with four-horse double-trees, shod the brakes and hung hooks on the sides, to carry the stove-pipes and tent poles.

They gave the bolts on the high seat an extra twist. Badger holes in that country were rough medicine. Heavy

planks were fastened to the bottom of the wagon box, sticking out two feet on each side, between the front and hind wheels. Water barrels were set on them and strapped to the side of the box.

As jingler, Dick played a high hand. He was on the jump, whooping and hollering for sixteen hours a day. There was more doing than he could keep up with and he had no time for pretties. Dick reveled in a hard day's work and a sound sleep.

He woke feeling that each morning stepped him up another notch towards being a man. His wild drawl, "Go fer 'em!" broke the cowboys' morning rest and smashed many a leisure chat among the hands. But it had taken the sting out of the name they had given him—Gopher Dick—and he made them like it.

The first supply wagon that rolled back from Medicine Hat after Dick's rescue of old Pete had brought him a surprise. The Hydes had ordered a new hat, shirts, two pair of overalls, new boots, socks and underwear. Mr. Hyde had taken Dick to his quarters and seen him into them. He was so spick and span that he blushed at himself in the looking glass. But when Mrs. Hyde said he was a fine looking boy, that was too much. He wasn't going to be any landmark for beauty.

He headed straight for the bunkhouse, working his shoulders and twisting his spine. Underclothes were a new thing for Dick. They tickled! The socks caused him to crinkle up his toes. The punchers called him "Momma's boy," which didn't help matters any.

Dick traded the new boots to another fellow for old ones, hid his socks and underclothes under his pillow and wadded his hat in his hands to take off the newness. The fancy Stetson made too big an impression. Dick's outfit looked as if it had been badly stayed with when he came in for the next meal. Mrs. Hyde was peeved but Hank understood.

"Now, now, mother," he said, "the boy's all right. There's a hard life behind him or I miss my bet. It would probably raise yer hair if he'd tell you about it. I'm bettin' he never will. He's one of them fellers that's darnable glad for gettin' better things in life. He don't call himself unlucky cause he ain't a millionaire, but darn lucky 'cause he's not a wood-rat. He's never seen women folks and thinks you're makin' fun of him when you talk nice."

Mrs. Hyde thawed out a bit as the days rolled on towards the June roundup and took to showing Dick favors. He would drop his head, turn red behind the gills and make for the corral on a lope. Little Ann found him as shy of conversation as a baby giraffe.

Dick was promoted to nighthawk for the roundup, which raised his salary and standing in the outfit. A nighthawk, as he is called in the north country, holds the saddle horse cavvy at night, taking them from the day jingler at sundown and herding them where the feed is good till daylight, when he brings them back.

A good nighthawk draws a lot of water on an outfit, equal to the foreman and the cook. Riders that can stay on the job all night and not go to sleep are valuable. If one loses the horses during the night, the whole outfit is blocked in the morning and a roundup outfit on foot is darned disagreeable.

A nighthawk can almost demand his own price and a roundup foreman is taking a lot of chances if he tries to can him. If the nighthawk is canned he does it himself, because he's made a mistake. He won't stay to live it down and just changes territory overnight.

AS morning broke for the roundup to pull out, the Rocking H was a moving mass of life. Over the cool breeze at sunrise came the nickering of saddle horses and their hoofs rumbling over the heavy sod. They tore into the big corral, their heads high, their manes waving, kicking and biting every chance they got.

Cowpunchers milled back and forth from the bunkhouse to the corrals, carrying their saddles and picking out their top mounts. The top horse is generally ridden the first day out. It's a day of easing up to big action.

"Reps" had flocked in from all parts of the country, bringing their beds and a string of eight or ten saddle horses. They came from the Five H, the P Cross, the Turkey Track, the Bar Seven Bar, the Walking T and as far southwest as the Circle H on Milk River.

Along came the renegades of the country, supposed to be looking for strays and reward horses. That was half of their profession. The other half was spotting

stuff that would do to steal in the future. They were usually pretty slick and the ranchers knew what they were up to, but they couldn't prove it.

Dave Russell, the roundup cook, climbed to his high seat on the chuck wagon and sat while his helpers hooked four head of snorting, high spirited animals in place. They were light stepping bays, half Percheron and half thoroughbred, with plenty of action and endurance to wheel the old chuck wagon at a high speed across the prairies.

Then came Gopher Dick, driving two horses on the bed wagon. The big corral gate swung open and out poured a string of horses, ornery old saddlers with their heads down and their ears back, running at full speed, biting and kicking as they passed each other. There were over two hundred of them, half of which carried the Rocking H brand.

Hazed by the day jinglers, they tore past the wagons onto the open flat beyond the ranch, where the jinglers checked them till the wagons caught up. A sorrel saddle horse, an old-timer at the game, trotted behind the bed wagon. The cavvy fell in behind him, fan shape. Then the cowboys strung out—the workers of the big open. They were a picture, sitting erect in their saddles, their big hats tilted on the windward side.

Hank swung to one side and topped a high knoll to watch them. His heart pumped heavily. The big outfit was his pride. He lifted his hat and scratched his bald spot. The pull of a roundup always stirred him. Age had slowed him up. He was needed at home to keep his big interests moving. But he hated to see the big cavalcade move out of sight. He could have watched it forever . . . . The sun set, a great red ball on the horizon, veiled by a scarlet haze that tinted the rolling ridges of the prairie like fire. The dull hum of mosquitoes drummed through the air as they settled on the army of men and horses which moved into the undisturbed quiet of the open range.

The chuck wagon pulled to a halt. Dave Russell slumped to the ground, shook his legs and tightened up his belt.

Supper was soon thrown out—beefsteak and fried potatoes, hot biscuits and canned corn. Each puncher snatched his tin plate, cup and artillery, loaded it out of the big pots and pans around the fire and sat down crosslegged, his plate in his lap.

The first night out, Dave Russell read the rules. He always made the best of that opportunity. Full of rum and beefsteak, he stood by the mess wagon, a pothook in his hand punctuating his sentences. Not a man moved as he bawled out:

"I want every one of you fellers to understand that as long as I'm here none of you is rootin' into the mess wagon. The first man that kicks on the grubkin leave! I'm not re-seasonin' any of this chow nor makin' knickknacks or appetizers fer none of you galoots. And I'll cut the bridle reins on the first horse that's tied to the chuck wagon. If you don't pile yer dishes in the tub you'll eat out of yer hat!

"There's no borrowin' pots and pans to wash in. And the last man to leave camp is supposed to help tear down the mess tent if it's up. Sugar to feed pet saddle horses is in Medicine Hat. I'll be glad to feed any man between meals that has missed the last five and none under that!

"I ain't callin' no man to chow the second time and all you sportsmen and rough peelers be sure and steer yer buckin' horses away from my cook fire. There's a spot fifty feet square I own around this mess wagon—wherever she sets, and the rest of the whole damn prairie is yours. Any man that don't roll up his bed and tie it will find it the next night right where he left it. My helpers is too busy to be tyin' up yer cradles fer you."

A bellowing good laugh and a snort went through the crowd and the boys commenced rolling out their beds on the grass.

Gopher Dick mounted his night horse, turned the cavvy out of the rope corral and followed behind them as they trotted off to the north. A still grayness hung over the prairie as the saddle horses rolled in the grass, loosening the dry saddle sweat from their backs, snorting the dust from their nostrils and shaking their bells.

Dick rode to a low knoll where he sat and watched the bunch slowly feed out, widening their range like a ripple from a pebble tossed on a quiet lake. He saw the horses maneuver. He loved them.

Dick leaned over on his horse's neck and half dozed till the white stillness of two o'clock roused him. He felt rested. Silence reigned. The night breeze had taken on a ghostly whisper. Most animal life was at its deadest repose. The stars in the sky seemed to crackle.

CHAPTER V

Marked for Boot Hill

THE faint whistle of a distant bird rang in Dick's ears. The howl of a coyote came to him. Dick knew it had traveled an endless distance over the prairies. It was out of place and, he was glad, a long way off. During this spell his horses would be easily frightened.

One sharp sound and they would bolt across the prairie at high speed, running several miles before he could turn them. He wasn't wishing that for himself. Hank Hyde had given him an idea. He was going to make a record for the Rocking H. At the first shoots of gray daybreak Dick headed the cavvy towards the roundup corral. They hit it on a wild gallop.

"Go fer 'em!" he yelled to the jinglers, as he unsaddled his horse and turned in for the day.

It was Dick's first roundup. The working part didn't bother him. He loved it. He was all ears and eyes. He watched Red Coon pair off his men and send them out on the big circle. He liked the way the boys slipped up to the rope corral, dragging the loop of their ropes behind them. With a careful toss, called the "Texas-overhand," they sailed the loop out and dropped it straight down on the horse they were after.

Dick took his cue. He was out to be an all round tophand. He practiced with his rope every spare moment. Often on moonlight nights when his herd was lying quiet, he would ride back and tie his saddle horse's head down to his front foot with the bridle reins. Then he'd practice roping him from every angle. He was untiring, quick and easy.

Sometimes he'd catch the saddle horn with a California back-hand throw. Sometimes the head or tail, with the Montana straight-out, a loop that is often used in a windy country. He had them all down pat even to the heel-catch, straight out and up, generally used by the prairie hands in roping calves on the big roundup.

On nights when his horses were restless and would break into short runs, he would rope the leader of the bunch that kept leaving, and practice some on him. His hand was growing used to the accurate flight of a rope. And not one of the boys on the roundup was the wiser.

If Dick learned that there was a mean horse in the bunch—one that would buck when caught and saddled up quick, he would take his cavvy to a big flat and ride slowly among them until he was close enough to rope the mean horse. Then he would saddle him and stage a wild ride. He was keeping himself fit. There was no tire-out to him.

He was giving satisfaction and Red Coon had his neck bowed, watching a chance to lay something to Dick. His growing favor among the boys didn't help Dick's standing with Red Coon one bit. Coon was the boss and he wasn't looking for competition from anyone, much less a kid. He even envied the laughs that Dick got out of the punchers.

But it was hard to slip up on Dick. He liked to do things and he did them with so much goodwill he shamed the fellows that set him to them. Being nighthawk, he wasn't around the boys much. In the early morning they were too busy to play pranks. He left with his cavvy shortly after supper. And during the day it was an unwritten law that a nighthawk must not be disturbed.

They knew by this time they couldn't job Dick with a bucking horse. He could ride any of them and loved it. As the days raced on, the roundup was boiling over to get Dick. He had them out-dodged so far, but it was only making pay day that much rougher.

Things popped one evening. It had been a blistering day. The flies were as thick as the cuss words. Every man's temper was about ready to fester. Fights or pranks were the only medicine the camp knew, for Dave Russell's jugs were his own property.

Dick was edgy. He hadn't slept, with the heat burning him and the flies sucking on his face. The world was laying in for a storm; and every man and beast in the roundup had his back humped up against it. Red Coon had been blowing fire through his nostrils all day.

DICK finished his supper first and walked away. He was eager to get himself and his cavvy off to the night's cool solitude. Red Coon watched him. An ugly grin came on his face. He slipped over to the big tub and took Dick's plate and artillery from it and tossed it back on the ground where Dick had eaten. He gave Slim Anderson, one of the renegades, a wink to call the cook's attention to it.

Dave Russell blew out his cheeks and bellowed.

"Damn that kid! He ain't gettin' away with that! Hey—you measly runt!" Dick dropped the reins on his night horse and came over. It was the first time the cook had spoken to Dick, and his accent wasn't exactly friendly.

"What do you want?" Dick called.

"Just this! I want to know who's flunkeyin' fer you? Who do you think is goin' to round 'em up?"

Dick's eye followed the direction of the angry pothook and saw his plate on the ground. He started to speak, then picked them up and slammed them in the tub. He knew he'd been jobbed. It was a rotten time for a joke.

"Well, what you goin' to do about it?" he shouted.

"Toss him up in the blanket fer breakin' rules!" Red Coon hollered as he ran and jerked a heavy blanket from his own bed.

Every man jumped to his feet to tune in on Dick. The break was most welcome and all rose to it with a yip, as they circled Dick. Dick's pride kept him from showing his resentment. He'd played too many jokes himself. He was in for some rough handling. He slipped his knife from his pocket, opened it and shoved it up his sleeve.

Six men grabbed hold of the blanket when Coon returned. Two shoved Dick over on it. While the men were getting their holds, Dick slipped his hand down alongside his leg, keeping the knife out of sight. The men tightened up, ready for a high toss. Dave Russell stood scratching his head with the crook of his iron pothook. He had seen Dick's knife blade come through the under side of the blanket.

"Toss him high, boys!" he yelled.

As they loosened on the blanket and lowered it to give the first flip, Dick jerked the knife up the full length of his side. The blanket split wide open and Dick fell out through the hole. The blanket went up too easy. The men were surprised.

"What a rotten blanket!" one bellowed.

Red Coon gave it one look. It was his new one, bought specially for the summer—split in half down the center. His red hair bristled.

"You'll git double the dose for this, young wart!" he snarled.

Coon made for another blanket. Dave stepped up with his pothook raised. Coon was shouting, "Bring him here!"

Old Dave Russell shook his pothook.

"No, you don't!" he bawled out. "A joke's a joke, and this one's on you, Coon. And if that boy goes up in a blanket so does me and this pothook!"

The boys hooted Coon and roared. It was hard to say which was the more taken back—Coon or Gopher Dick. This bellowing bull of an old cook, the he-grouch of the range, sure knew the inside of a joke, even if Red Coon didn't. There was more satisfaction at seeing Red Coon jobbed again by the kid than some of the boys dared to show. Dick was followed to his night horse with laughter and more good will than he'd ever had.

But a storm was gathering. The cavvy poured out of the corral and ran with their heads close to the ground, kicked up and tearing across the prairie like mad. As Dick looked back he saw the men hoisting the tents.

There came a lull with the inky blackness of night. The pressure grew heavy and the air became sluggy with a false warmness. Heavy clouds settled closer to the ground. The horses got down to hungry feeding as Dick rode a wide circle around them. At times he bumped square into them. Then he couldn't see them—only feel them.

It was so dark he had to trust to his imagination to guess where they were. Great streaks of crooked lightning shot through the northwest. The dull rumble of distant thunder roared steadily. The wind whipped up and on it came big drops of rain.

Dick turned his horse and drove him full speed at the cavvy. The drops of rain grew bigger as the lightning showed up the whole prairie and the horses running in a long line. Thin blue streaks like the phosphorous outlined their dark bodies and touched the tips of their

ears. Louder claps of thunder stopped the horses in one jump and milled them to a circle.

Dick rode on a run. He paid little attention to the death trap the badgers had dug beneath him. His only thought was to hold the cavvy. The stiff wind chilled him and a patter of cold rain bit at his cheek. The heavy storm was on.

The horses dropped their heads and turned their rumps to the beating storm, stepping back a little at a time. They held their noses close to the ground and stood motionless. Dick's hands were numb on the bridle reins and the big raindrops blurred his eyes. The steady rumble of loud thunder held the horses huddled together, waiting as if each crash would be their last.

Dick was cold and shook beneath his yellow slicker. This was not his first night in hard rain, though it was his first big cavvy. The pelter of the rain, the chatter of his teeth and the knock of his spurs settled into one droning rhythm, "Hold 'em—hold 'em!"

The horses were following him in a fan shape, crowding and running. Another streak of lightning flashed and a hard clap of thunder boomed. They struck together. It choked Dick. Through the blue blur he saw three horses drop right in front of him. His saddle horse quivered —then froze solid to the ground with fear. A dry burnt feeling came into Dick's eyes and mouth.

Another flash showed three horses dead on the prairie. An odor of burnt flesh filled Dick's nostrils. He shivered. Not from cold this time! His ears were still ringing and his head felt as though it was bursting open. But the cavvy was stopped for a while.

A SLOW steady rain set in. Lightning flashed in every direction. The roar of thunder went on throughout the night. Dick thought daylight would never come. It broke slowly. His directions were all gone. He had forgotten which was his right hand. He tried to get into his mind which way camp lay. He was as strange to himself as if he had landed on Mars.

He scanned the prairies for the white tops of the roundup tents. There wasn't any! He spotted a dark object lying low —way across the prairie. He stood up in his stirrups and whipped his horses off towards it on a high gallop. A half hour brought him to it.

The big tents were down and scattered out across the prairie. Dick corralled the horses, as the jinglers rustled out in their yellow slickers to relieve him. Cowpunchers poked their heads from beneath their soaked beds. Some of their hats and clothes were blown away. They began tugging at their wet boots. There was no hurry about washing up for breakfast. They'd been bathing all night!

Old Dave Russell crawled from under the chuck wagon like a grizzly bear, took one look at the weather, then gurgled his jug high above his head for a long time. He swore there'd be no breakfast till the mess tent was gathered up from the prairie and pitched.

Coon gnawed off a new chew of tobacco as he stood by the corral, counting the horses. Several punchers were helping him. After a close examination the verdict came back that three were gone. They hunted Dick down and Coon railed at him.

"Any horses get away from you, Dick?"

"Not a one!" Dick answered.

"You're jest three short in yer count," Coon grinned, "my top horse and two others is gone. But I'm winners about forty dollars on the strength of it. Come on, boys—cough up!"

Dick saw money changing hands.

"Coon, you mean to say you bet I couldn't hold the cavvy?" Dick spunked up.

"Yep! And look at the money!" Coon shook it in his face.

"Well, you better be handin' that back and matchin' it yourself, Coon. I held 'em so tight you'll find your three dead out on the prairie."

The boys piled on Coon. The whole camp was in an uproar and Coon could not make himself heard above the stampede.

"You mean to say, Banjo, my top horse, is dead?" Coon was yelling.

"Yes, sir!" Dick shouted back with a little too much satisfaction.

"Well, the whole damn outfit will pay for that! How did you kill 'em? Crowd them up in a bunch till they stampeded and run over one another?"

"Naw—the lightning picked them off right in front of me. I don't know just where you'll find them—but they're out

there some place. Go look for them if you don't take my word. The next time you do any bettin' on me you'd better bet for me!"

Coon's ugly jaws set. He gritted his teeth and spat a yard in front of him. His pig eyes narrowed as he counted the forty dollar bills back to the boys.

"You don't get away with that, Coon," one yelled. "Come across yourself. We're takin' the kid's word till you prove different."

Coon had been betting two to one. By the time he had peeled out eighty additional dollars he was about as mad as he knew how to get. Money was an intimate thing with Coon. He'd rather have lost his teeth. The boys snickered and laughed up their sleeves. They were too close to rub it in. But the joke would make the boss famous.

So it rode! Coon's men didn't share his gloom. They saw the funny side. Coon couldn't, for the laugh was on him.

The roundup had made the big circle to the east and was now at Hay Lake. It rained for three days and nights. Thousands of small lakes formed all over the country in every low place. Coulees and rivers ran booming full.

The cowpunchers kept up an endless game of poker in the bunk tent. They argued and quarreled. Several fights were started. A few wound up seriously and there were cowpunchers with black eyes and sore heads.

They told wampus stories of the great cattle king, old man Chinook, who ruled the big prairie in a cowpunchers' imaginary world. He was supposed to be the half brother to the big guy that blew his breath across the prairie country, melting the snow in the spring.

Old Chinook was the feller who cleared the timber off the prairie country to run cattle on. When he found it too small, he turned it up edgeways to range on both sides. He hauled the dirt out of the hole that made Lake Michigan, over into British Columbia, and slapped up the Rocky Mountains as windbreaks for his cattle.

The Sweet Grass Buttes, three lofty peaks near the U. S. border, was where he lost the end gate out of his wagon and spilt some dirt on his way. White Horse Lake near the border was a duck pond he made for his kids. It took nine cowhides to make a shoe for him, and they built them in the summer time so they could be made outside.

CHAPTER VI

Six-Gun Treachery

THE fourth morning's sun rose clear and bright. The whole country sounded with the call of prairie birds. Thin streaks of fog hung close to the ground, traveling like smoke in the bottoms of the small ravines. Ducks and mud-hens swarmed overhead and called. Hundreds of muskrats swam through the bulrushes of Hay Lake.

The roundup was at the far east of the range, ready for the back-circle. Every horse was picked up and held; and the bunch was growing fast as they drifted west again. The big herd was held separate from Dick's saddle horse cavvy. There were too many horses now to corral and pick saddlers from. Dick had a real job to keep them from joining up with the big bunch.

The roundup wagon was moving now about every day. Part of the boys did nothing but haze the large bunch from one camp to another, making on an average twenty-five miles to the move. Others rode long circles both ways from camp, often covering sixty-five miles a day.

The day the outfit camped at Breed Lakes, Slim Anderson found a large half-thoroughbred mare of his that he wanted to break to ride. He insisted on throwing her in the cavvy. He asked Coon's permission. Coon, wanting to hang as much as possible on Dick, told him it was all right.

That evening, as Dick was about to let the cavvy loose for the night, he located the old mare, from the fuss she was stirring in the corral. He raised a rumpus himself. He told Coon he would not take the mare out. Coon sidled up to him.

"Looky here, young feller, I'm runnin' this outfit and you'll do as I say. Either take that mare out with the cavvy or leave!"

"Well, I jest as soon go! That old pelter will keep the cavvy runnin' all night. Slim Anderson ain't so almighty that he deserves any favors round here!"

By that time all the boys were closing in. The argument was getting hot. Dick insisted there was a rule that no man could turn a mare into the cavvy, no matter if it was Red Coon himself; and if he was quitting his job, it was to help the game out and uphold the code of the range that Coon was breaking. Coon told him fine. But Dick thought a minute. Finally he spunked up.

"All right! I'll take the cavvy out, but I'll turn that mare loose the first break she makes."

"If you do, young bird, you'd better not show up here in the mornin'. I'll kick yer damn tail down!"

Dick was mounting his horse.

"Well—why don't you come and do it now, you big red-headed bully?"

The boys yelled and cheered. Coon's red whiskers went to smoking. He'd never been sassed up before. Dick yanked down his rope as Coon started after him. He whirled his horse straight toward him, swinging his loop. Coon stood his ground till he saw it wasn't a joke. Then he whirled and started on a run for the bed wagon. Old Dave came running out with his pothook.

As Coon dropped to go under the wagon Dick sailed his loop out and caught Coon by the feet, dallied his rope around the horn, whirled his horse and dragged Coon back into the circle. Red twisted and squirmed. He reached in his pocket for his knife. Dick gave him another jerk, hollering at him:

"If you try to take that rope off, I'll drag you to death. Just lay quiet till we get through arguin'!"

Coon did as he was told. He could read in Dick's face that he meant it. He remembered the way the kid looked when he had hurled a rock in his belly. The boys had never seen him fired up before. His face was white with anger, his back straight as he held his death grip on the rope around the horn of his saddle. The men liked the guts of the kid, standing up for his rights.

Coon bucked up again, trying to scare Dick. He bellowed out what he'd do when he got loose and reached to loosen the rope. Dick socked the spurs to his horse and jerked him a full ten feet, where he hit on his back with a groan.

"Had 'nough, Coon?" he asked.

"No, sir! You young devil! I'm not takin' this from no kid!"

Slim Anderson made a run towards Dick's horse. Old Dave headed him off with the pothook right between his eyes. The old bull of a cook was out for blood.

"I'm fer fair play!" he bellowed. "Coon, why don't you be a man and holler 'nuff?"

Coon gulped a little and hollered "E-nough!"

Dick threw him the slack on the rope and he kicked out of it. Then he swung his horse to the side and coiled up his rope.

"What do you say, Coon," he called. "Does the old mare stay in the cavvy or not?"

"Yep! She stays in the cavvy and you're fired. I'll do the nighthawkin' myself from here on out. Get down off that horse and turn him loose. You're walkin' from here!"

"Not by a damn sight!" Dick grinned. "I got a horse under me and I'm goin' to keep him there. You can catch another one out of the herd."

COON made towards the bed wagon as if to get a bridle. The bunch split up. Some followed. Old Dave smelt a rat. He rolled along, keeping close to Coon, making out as if it was over as far as he was concerned. Slim Anderson was back on his feet, nursing his head. The old cook saw that too.

Coon's saddle was lying against his bed. He made a move for his bridle, but Dave saw his hand go into his war sack under the head of his bed. Dave turned his back so he could watch out of the corner of his eye. Coon jerked his six-shooter out and whirled it towards Dick.

Old Dave gave one jump. He brought his pothook down over Coon's hand, knocking the gun sprawling.

With whack after whack he laid the pothook onto Coon. Coon guarded his head with his arms. Old Dave took a quick side-swipe into the pit of his stomach and knocked Coon's wind out of him. The men ran up in a bunch and pulled old Dave off to keep him from killing Coon.

"I'll kill him like a dog!" Dave was raging. "The idea of a man pullin' a gun on a kid! We'd ought to lynch him!"

A few minutes brought Coon back to himself, rubbing his bruises and trying to blink out what had happened.

"Well, what do you think about it now, Coon?" old Dave said. "You goin' to call good enough and shake hands with the kid? You'd better! The kid's right and if you ever lay a hand on him, I'll beat yer brains out!"

"I won't hurt the kid," Coon grumbled, "but he's leavin' right now."

"No, you don't, Coon!" Tack Hudson, a big, smooth-voiced fellow, moved up. He had gathered the name Tack because he'd tackle anything, whether he had a chance or not. He was an old stand-by of the Rocking H, who had accumulated a small outfit of his own but still spent part of his time on the big ranch. When he spoke the boys listened. The buzzing among them stopped as he went on:

"Coon, you've run this outfit too long when you try to pull a deal like this. I'm with old Dave and the kid. If you fire that kid you're the one that will leave. Hank Hyde ain't here but there's enough of us boys and good will to run the roundup for him without you. Hyde wouldn't stand for a rotten deal like that even from his mother — and you know it!"

All the boys backed him up. Coon looked at their set faces. There was nothing friendly for him in them and they would stand by their guns. He saw that after all being a foreman wasn't so much. Being a sport was what he was short. He thought it over a moment.

"All right. Have it your way, boys."

"Shake hands with the kid—and call it off!" Dave insisted.

Dick turned his horse away as Coon started towards him. But when he saw old Dave following up he stopped and stuck out his hand.

Coon's grip wasn't a friendly one. It was more like a twist he'd give an enemy in the dark. There was lots of promise to it. But Dick tightened down on it in dead earnest. Those two had a perfect understanding.

"Drop the rope and let 'em out!" Dick hollered.

"Shall we cut out the mare?" Tack yelled.

"Let her go! I'll herd the old pelter!" Dick shouted back. The cavvy broke through the ropes on a high run.

It was a pale moonlight night. Dick jogged around his herd. They were giving him grief. The old mare was stirring up the cavvy in fine shape. The geldings fought and ran and squealed. Dick stood it as long as he could. Then he shook out his loop, bolted towards the mare and caught her as she hit the end of the rope. She landed in a heap.

Dick got off and tied her down. He cut a piece off his lariat and tied his saddle horse's head down to his foot so he could catch him when he was needed. The saddle horses formed a circle around him and watched the proceedings. Dick felt like a star acrobat in a circus. A mare would hold the attention of any cavvy!

Dick worked around until he got his saddle on the mare and cinched up plenty tight. Then he put on his bridle, crawled in the middle of her, reached down and loosened his hog rope from her feet. He spurred her in the shoulder and up she came. She dropped her head and commenced to unwind, bucking off across the badger hole. Dick spurred her on both sides and whipped her over the head with his hog rope.

He was having more fun than she was. The old saddlers followed up. Their curiosity had them spellbound. She quit bucking and started to run. Dick hazed and worked on her. It went on all night. Every time she'd quit he would give her some more. He was taming her plenty for Slim! All night he fogged her, the saddle horses following after and watching.

The next morning he rode in on his own horse. The boys were spread out around the chuck wagon eating breakfast when Tack jerked his thumb towards the corral and burst out laughing.

The old mare had come to the outside of the horses and was standing against the rope. She was a hard looking piece of furniture. Her ears lopped forward. Her head hung low. There were wet spots beneath her eyes. Her back was coated with the lather of dry sweat and her flank drawn up like a two-year-old sausage. Her tail hung in a droop as though it would never wave again. The boys all looked and laughed.

"By gosh! Dick, you sure give her a large evening," old Dave chuckled. "That ain't no way to treat a lady."

The roundup was nearly over. They were coming back on their last lap and had begun shedding the reps. They held

the big herd while each rep cut out his horses and a few of the boys gave him a hand to start him on his way. Each rep as he came in to get his saddle horses from the cavvy made it a point to find Dick and thank him for his services as nighthawk.

It's mighty seldom for a rep to have all his horses through a roundup, for nighthawks often go to sleep. Dick hadn't lost one of them. They all invited him to come and spend a while at their ranch. Each gave Dick some kind of a present, spurs, hackamores, saddle blankets, quirts, chaps — even money.

Gopher Dick was well togged up as the big roundup pulled towards the headquarters ranch. When they came in good view of the Rocking H, Dick's hide twitched all over with life and freedom. He'd be glad to see Hank Hyde. His throat swelled up a bit as the white covered chuck wagon swung into the high gates.

CHAPTER VII

Rangeland Menace

DICK was plumb fresh when he woke the next morning. Throwing his covers in the air he landed on the floor yelling, "Go fer 'em!" Cusses and groans rose from the punchers as they turned and doubled in their beds. Things were quiet outside. The big rush was over. Taking his saddle horse Dick took off across the prairie. He was back on shift as jingler again.

The sun lazied over the hill through streaked red washboard clouds. A soft west wind rustled the brown tipped grass. To Dick the world was half asleep. A ground owl walked a half-circle round his hole, stood erect like an angry little man and screeched.

"Go on—you fool!" Dick laughed. "I won't dig out your young 'uns!"

A shaggy tailed coyote loped up a ridge and looked back over his shoulder at Dick. A gopher crossed the trail. The coyote doubled his speed and grabbed him. With one deft flip he threw the gopher in the air, picked it up, and ran for safety. Dick laughed. Life was gay again. There went a five-cent gopher tail over the ridge!

Dick rode to a high knoll overlooking the whole country. He located his cavvy and his eyes drifted off to the numberless bunches of stock on the open prairie. He saw new black specks—settlers were moving in. Small buildings were going up and thin lines of smoke were rising from them.

A savage fear crept over Dick. The small farmers would wipe out the ranchers, move them back, and scar the face of the great prairie like smallpox. With a hurried swing towards his horses, he whipped it from his mind.

He had them soon running towards the corral. The big roundup had done plenty to them. Their hair was shaggy and stood on end. Some were still marked with saddle sweat. Their ribs and hip bones stuck out. The stride of their gallop was shortened and slowed to a dogged rhythm. They carried their heads low and traveled further apart, nipping at one another half-heartedly.

He slammed his horses in the corral and made for the chuck house. The boys were already eating and the whiff of home-cooked bacon and eggs sent Dick to his plate on high. Old man Hyde sat at the end of the table.

"Well, boys," he was saying, "I'm glad the job's over and you're all back again. There's nothin' like a big family. Did it look like all the big bunch was in the pasture, Dick?"

"Yep! But it looked more like a corral than a pasture. They et nigh all the grass out of it in one night. It's a good thing we have another pasture for the saddle horses. They was clear to the far end. Say, Mr. Hyde, did you see them homesteaders squattin' around the country? I seen three new ones off to the east of the pasture."

"Yes, and there's a lot of them movin' in west of here," growled Tack Hudson. "Damn it! This range will soon be gone. That's what a railroad does to any country—makes it unfit fer a free man to live in."

Hyde smiled and folded his hands on the table. He spoke in a low, pleasing tone.

"Don't worry about that, boys. There's room for all of us on this big prairie. There ain't none of them fellers seems to have a dime. I've already sold some of them horses on time, so they could get their crops planted. They're good people, just exactly the same as us and got as much right here. There will al-

ways be plenty of range here and if you boys sees any of them fellers needin' anything, don't be afraid to take a little of my time and give them a hand."

"Like the devil! I'll never give them a hand!" snarled Coon. "I seen them move into eastern Canada. They swarmed in like blow flies and blowed everything they could land on and then cussed 'cause they couldn't get it all at once. Their maggots got so thick the big outfits had to close down and let them crawl out. In five years, Hyde, you'll be askin' them if you can drink out of yer own waterhole."

An uneasy laugh went around the table—the only kind of recognition they knew how to give an unpleasant truth. Hyde sat silent, a far-away look in his eyes.

After the eggs, hot cakes and bacon were poked out of sight, the boys eased back in their chairs, cooled their coffee and smoked a cigarette with the leisure of a million years. Finally one made the break, shoved back from the table and started out. In a moment the whole ranch was moving. They mounted and in twos and fours rode to the big herd without an order from anyone or the passing of a single word about their work. Each man on the Rocking H knew his place.

WHEN they had cut about three hundred head from the big bunch, and hazed them back into the big corral, the work started. Several small corrals opened into the big one, and from it the cutting went on.

There were more mares and colts than anything else. All the yearlings, two-year-olds and threes, both mares and geldings, were cut out first and thrown into one of the small pens. Then the old mares that were past the breeding age and were pensioned for the good they'd done were cut into another pen.

The young geldings, four- and five-year-olds that were ready to be broken, were spotted and corralled. A herd of horses on the cut is meaner than a bunch of cows. They run faster and can pull more tricks to get back into the herd. The men were all trained; they worked fast and silently.

The slashing went on until only the mares and colts were left in the big corral. Then the gate to the west was opened and the mares and colts were let out into the big pasture. Another big bunch was brought in and worked the same way.

Red Coon, Tack Hudson and a couple of the old hands did the cutting. Dick was among those that played on the gates, opening and shutting them as the riders cut and hazed each horse into its separate pen.

Dick was fast on his feet and his gate never missed. He was having a glorious time, so much awake that the dust and fine manure which blew up from the stirring hoofs filling his nose and eyes never bothered him. The stir of horses boiled his imagination.

After the cut-work was done everything was turned loose but the mares, colts and the young geldings to be broken to ride and work. They were selected according to their size and action. The big ones, heavy-footed and slow, would be broken for work, shipped out and sold to the farmers. The light active ones, bred to the endurance of prairie miles, were picked for saddle horses and would be turned over to the bronc fighters to break.

Dick had spoken to old man Hyde about getting in on the bronc fighting. Hyde knew he was capable of the job, for he loved horses and his patience was everlasting; but he drew him out as to his methods.

"I can ride any of 'em, Mr. Hyde, you know that, but when I'm breakin' a bronc I'm not showin' off or teasing him to buck. The higher they go the better I like it, but I don't figger no north country horse should ever be bucked, while he's being broke. He shouldn't be handled rough.

"When horses git the buckin' habit they always keep it up. If they never buck as colts, when they're older and things goes wrong they won't get excited and break in two. See?"

"All right, son," Hyde chuckled. "I'll see you git your chance."

Dick whistled as no other bronc fighter ever whistled on the Rocking H. He was getting on in the world of men!

But first came the branding of colts. Small bunches of mares and colts were cut out and put in the big round corral where there were no corners for them to jam up in. The cowboys did this work on foot and it was swift action all the time.

As a colt would run by, they'd rope him by the front feet and throw him.

One cowboy jumped his head and held it down. Another pulled his tail between his hind legs and held it in his flank, cramping his hind legs so he couldn't kick his ear or the cowboy's head. Another held the rope on his front feet tight, to hold him on his side and keep him from tangling up in the rope.

Dick was either on their heads or carrying the hot branding irons to Red Coon and Tack Hudson, who carefully stamped the Rocking H on the left thigh. Branding was considered an art. If it's burnt too deep it leaves an ugly blot and grows with the horse into a big, scabby-looking brand. If it's put on lightly and held carefully and steadily, so that it does not slip or blur, it soon heals over. When the scab peals off new hair grows back over the brand at a different angle, leaving a neat small welt and a brand that can be read easily.

Dick went to bronc fighting. He worked all day in the corrals, breaking broncs to lead, then saddling them quietly and taking short rides on them, in order not to break them down while they were young. There were many tricks they had to be teased out of until they got used to carrying a load and would turn without fighting or shaking their heads when a puncher reined them up.

Work was no longer piling up. It was being done! The ranch cook cussed, for he had to serve meals at all hours of the day. A man must eat when he was able to get in. Old Dave Russell didn't get in on this. He was like all the other round-up cooks. He never worked excepting when the wagon was out.

He spent the rest of his time resting up and telling about how hard he'd worked. He leaned over the bar in the saloon in Medicine Hat till his elbows poked out through his red flannel shirt. Everybody knew he'd be back two days before the next roundup started.

CHAPTER VIII

Fugitive Rider

DICK spent two years at the Rocking H. Hard riding and round-ups through the summer, spring and fall ironed all the grease out of him. And he could stand the winter with its driving wind that gnawed into the marrow of bones! Often as he fought to shove poor cattle throught snowdrifts towards a feed ground, he and the coyotes were the only ones out.

Dick's energy was backing up. He wanted to ride 'way off to the other side of the farthest prairie knoll he'd ever seen. He was curious of the beyond. He had heard great tales of ranches south of there—the Two Bar K on Milk River Ridge and the D Bar K further west. Smaller outfits lay up against the foot of the Rockies near the U.S. and Canadian border.

Early one morning he called Hank Hyde off to the side.

"Mr. Hyde, I want to go on a vacation. I don't know just how long I'll be, but I want to step around a bit and take a look at old Big Chief Butte over thar."

Dick made a circular jerk with his thumb. Hyde understood. He wouldn't ask any questions, but his big face was a bit heavy and his voice a little thick.

"I reckon, son, every lad sees a mountain that calls him sometime or other. I'm not the one to tell you to look away. But remember when you climb it, if the air gets thin, don't be ashamed to come back. You've earned a home here. We need you. I'm getting a bit old and Red Coon's fallin' down on his job. There's something wrong with the man. I've been hopin' you might take his place some day!"

Dick choked. He didn't expect this. Had never thought of it! It made him want to stay—yet he knew he couldn't live down the things he wanted to see and learn. He spoke slowly.

"Coon is one of the big reasons I'm leavin'. I'm not old enough to run a cow outfit. Some day I'll be, then I'll come back. If Red Coon don't play the game square with you, I'll drag him so far the next time that he'll lay quiet."

He walked with Hyde to the office to draw his pay. Hank Hyde was surprised when he saw how the figures stacked up. Dick had bought a couple of good horses from him and still had four hundred in cash coming.

Dick threw his bed on his pack horse and saddled the other one. Hank Hyde walked out to tell him good-by and open the big gate. A gnawing hanker pulled at him as he waved good-by to the rancher.

Next morning he was fanning it early and topped the ridge where he could look down to the south and west at the Big Chief Butte, half hidden in the blue Indian haze. He forded Milk River, a murky looking stream that boiled along and went on down the valley.

Climbing a short rise he saw a rider coming his way. It was a boy of his own age, riding a clumsy brown horse, more like a farmer's plug than a cowhand's horse. Every bit of his outfit was spanking new. A cheap flimsy looking red leather bridle—a squash rind of a stock saddle! Dick saw at a glance that it was a mail-order outfit which probably cost a whole twenty dollars.

The old plow horse stopped, threw up its head and nickered. Dick laughed. He'd seen such outfits before. An upshoot of a boy had gone cowhand—probably worked all summer on a dairy farm to buy his scandalous layout, the cheapest of all cheaps! About his neck he wore a gaudy orange colored muffler. His chaps had a thousand shiny ornaments. Dick looked down at his own plain old cowhides.

"Where's the Two Bar K outfit he asked.

The boy looked at him half amazed and pointed with his thumb.

"Their roundup is camped over thar a few miles!" he drawled out of one side of his mouth. "Got a smoke on you, Buddy?"

Dick shook his head.

"Nope—don't use them!"

"Wal—what kind of a cowboy are you? You don't smoke cigarettes?"

Dick gave him a half-laughing glance, and told him the truth.

"Probably I'm the kind of a cowboy you want to be. What's your troubles anyway, boy, and what's your name?"

"Oh, jest call me Pete. I jest come from over that damn Two Bar K layout. They cleaned me out of everything I had but my outfit here. They got away with a hundred and fifty dollars in cash."

"What?" Dick put in. "You don't mean to say they stuck you up?"

"No—they didn't stick me up!"

DICK saw a cloud come over his fat, dark face as he clawed a plug of chewing tobacco out of his chap pocket.

"Well, cheer up, Pete. We all have to learn. Them boys is probably just puttin' you through the mill. Tell me about it."

"Wal—I went over thar and hit them up for a job, and the first thing they wanted to know if I could ride a buckin' horse. I told them, 'Hell, yes! Any of them!' I stayed thar a couple of days. I rode three or four ponies that bucked a little and I was thinkin' I was quite a tophand when they brought in an ornery lookin' little bay one. They said they'd bet I couldn't ride that one. I thought by that time I could ride any of them, so I bet a few dollars with each one of them and saddled the boy up.

"Jest before I was mountin' the boss of the outfit come out and wanted to bet me fer the rest I had. That made it even a hundred and fifty. They held the horse while I got on. I thought I'd have enough money when I was through with that ride to go into town and celebrate. That bay horse turned on. He done more things in a minute than I could keep track of, and when I lit off on my head them cowboys hooted and yelled.

"I said I wanted another try at him. They give it to me. He throwed me again. Then they laughed and called me a drugstore cowboy and said the only place I ever punched cows was in a milking stall. Wal—they got all my money, anyhow!"

Dick's cheeks were pooching out with laughter.

"Boy, it looks like you'd had a little hard luck! Don't worry! I'll bet half of them fellers had it pulled on them when they was young. Where you goin' now, Pete?"

"Back over to the farmin' settlement. I've had all the cowpunchin' I want."

"Tell you what we'll do, Pete. You come over to the river a little ways. I got some grub rolled up in my bed here and we'll eat. You can tell me a lot about that country."

Pete got touchy because Dick burst out laughing every now and then. He was all right, only he hadn't started young enough. When their lunch was over Dick propositioned him.

"How would you trade your outfit for mine?"

"What do you mean? Horses?"

"Nope—I mean saddles, chaps, bridles and all that ten cent trappings you got."

Pete welched. He thought Dick was handing him another jobbing. After a lot of hard, earnest persuasion on Dick's part, the deal went over. Dick was the chuckling owner of the squash rind of a stock saddle, the ungodly chaps and the ten cent bridle. The outfit sure looked funny on Dick's big buckskin cowhorse. Dick imagined he could hear his old horse laugh as he looked back at those pretties. Pete was in a hurry to get gone, for Dick had given him more money to boot than his mail-order outfit cost.

Dick rode with his head up. He was more than in a hurry himself. He'd hate for Hank Hyde to see him in that outfit! His old bridle alone was worth more than the whole concern and he felt like a bargain counter on the loose.

The Two Bar K roundup was camped on a small lake. Dick located it and made straight towards it. Some of the cowboys and the boss were still around the wagon when Dick rode up on a high gallop, flopping all over his saddle. He slid his horse up on his haunches hollering "Whoa! Whoa!" Flopping off on the wrong side of his horse, he spat out the last of the chew of tobacco he'd borrowed from Pete.

"Is this the Two Bar K outfit?" he asked the boys as he strutted up.

He saw them glance at one another and then laugh. One of the boys turned and waved at the boss.

"Hey—come here! Here's another mail-order got loose already. I guess he's lookin' fer a job. Can you put him on?"

"Sure I kin use him," the boss grinned. "We need some good men!"

Dick spat again and threw out his chest.

"Well—what are you payin'? This is the Two Bar K outfit, ain't it? I want to know 'fore I start in. Darned if I'm goin' to work fer any of them cheap outfits. Where does a feller git something to eat round here? I can't work without eatin'!"

The boss pointed towards the chuck wagon. Dick left his horses standing and started towards it. He saw the whole outfit, boss and all, go into a huddle. Dick picked up a plate and commenced to look around. He thought the cook was most pleasant—first roundup cook of that kind he'd ever heard of. He even helped him load his plate with beefsteak, potatoes and beans and poured him a cup of coffee. Dick looked around and stalled.

"Where's yer table!" he drawled.

The cook gave him a little nudge.

"Ssh! No roundups has tables. Don't let the boss get wise. Act as though you been on a hundred."

Dick sat down and the boss and the hands moved up around him watching. He tried to hold his plate in his lap—but wiggled around till he spilt it and had to get a reload. The boss warmed up and sat down beside him.

"Boy, we're glad you rode this way. We need another hand. One of our boys left in a kinda hurry this mornin'. Kin you ride broncs?"

"Well — y-e-s — what you mean — horses?" he half way stuttered, then jammed his mouth full of potato to keep from laughing. In a coarse voice he hollered to the cook:

"Hey, there! Bring me some coffee!"

THE cook did as he was told. The boss asked Dick again if he could ride a bucking horse.

"Heck, yes!" Dick assured him. "I've rode lots of 'em. My pa had some that would kick both feet off the ground at once and I used to drive the milk cows up to the pasture on old Nell. When you'd stick yer feet in her flanks a feller had to sure be careful for she'd kick up her hind parts till you couldn't hardly stay on. Yep—she was pretty salty fer an old mare!"

Dick dropped his knife and fork in the dirt and halloed for the cook to bring him another one. The cook pranced out with it. Dick was wishing Dave Russell could see him now.

He rose up from eating and left his dishes scattered out on the ground, pulled up his pants and tightened his belt.

"Hey there, boss! What do they call you?"

"My name is Abe Carter. What do they call you, son?"

"Aw—anything—jest so you call me in time fer meals. Sam is what my ma calls me, but I don't want that little old name out here. Hang something tough on me! Call me Bronc! That ought to be a good name. I'm a bronc rider!"

Dick heard some snickers. He turned and every cowpuncher ducked his head, was busy looking off at the scenery or

fixing his boots. Dick knew they were having a hard time to keep from bursting.

"Well, Abe," Dick drawled, "where's yer hay and oats? I want to feed my horses a little."

Then the boys did laugh. They squealed and held their sides—even the old cook. They tried to make Dick believe that was the only funny thing they'd seen and they sure laid it on heavy.

"I'm sorry," Abe Carter said, "this roundup don't have any hay and oats, but you can turn yer horses loose in the cavvy."

Dick unsaddled, and turned his horses in the cavvy. Then he came back, sat down on the ground, pulled out his handkerchief and commenced wiping the dust off his new outfit. Dick asked every cowpuncher that passed if he didn't think he had a good saddle. Every one agreed it was the best they'd seen! Dick wanted to knock them down for lying.

He dragged his bed up and put it under the chuck wagon, picked up his saddle and outfit, walked up and asked the cook if he could put it in the chuck wagon. He was afraid the dew would hurt it! The old cook rustled around, pulled the wagon cover back on one side and helped Dick roll it in. Dick had them hooked! A cowpuncher met every man that came in and from the actions he knew they were spreading the good news of a new joke joining the outfit.

Things quieted down when Dick went to bed. He couldn't sleep. He lay in the white moonlight and looked over at the Big Chief Butte and the rest of the shaggy peaks of the Canadian Rockies. His mind drifted back to old man Hyde and he wondered what he was doing.

He thought of the big excitement that would take place in the morning and how would be the best way to play the game. He was all stirred up and a bit sore from holding his inside chuckles to himself. They were as green as they thought he was! He'd begun to see a way to make a living without working for it—just having a lot of fun.

The next morning the camp was astir at daylight. Dick jumped up, rubbed his eyes and ran around to the cook all out of breath. He grabbed him and turned him half around by the arm. The old cook pulled back and was about to hit him—before he thought. Then he burst out laughing.

"What's the matter?" Dick asked. "What's wrong? Somebody sick? What's everybody gettin' up this early fer?"

The cook grumbled, "Nothin'. They just had a hard day's ride. This was the last day out and they was making the headquarters ranch and wanted to get there before night." Dick acted pleased and commenced to look around for a wash basin. He asked the cook where the hot water was to wash in.

The cook played up to Dick's mistake and gave him a stew kettle and poured out some of the hot coffee water for him to wash in. Dick had to go behind the wagon to use it. It was a bigger luxury than he'd ever known. He got to thinking. An outfit that would go that far towards a joke might be a little hard to put one over on!

DICK soon saw the outfit wasn't so big as the Rocking H. They were running cattle—not horses. At breakfast he searched the faces of every man to be sure that none of them had ever been on the Rocking H and seen him. Luck was playing with him. They were all strangers.

Dick swallowed his breakfast in a hurry, pulled his saddle from the chuck wagon, took off his lasso rope and made a high run, whirling the loop above his head awkwardly. He made for the cavvy in the rope corral.

He sailed his rope out, scaring the bunch. He caught the wrong horse just as they smashed down the rope and ran out. The day jinglers mounted their horses and took in after them while thousands of curses were hurled at Dick. Old Abe, the boss, walked down to him.

"Don't do that any more, boy," he said. "You'll have them horses so no corral will hold them. One of my men will rope yer horses fer you if you want one. Besides, if you're goin' to ride fer the outfit you don't need yer own. I'll stake you!"

Dick backed up to the bed wagon and sat with his head down till one of the boys caught a horse for him. Dick sized it up from every angle to make sure it was a gentle one. He was a loose-eared old boy, with a Roman nose and a pair of pig eyes that had been half shut for

years. A score of white saddle marks on his back told the story of a long trail. All he could catch on that horse would be a cold.

He dragged his saddle around to the wrong side of the horse and shoved it up on him, then walked to the other side and cinched it up. It made no difference. The old plug would just as soon go as come. Dick wouldn't be having any trouble that day! Evidently they were saving the fun till they got to the ranch and had more time and spectators. He crawled up the wrong side of the old horse, lit in the saddle, gave him a dig with his spurs and waved his hat.

"Yippee—yippee! Let 'em go!" he hollered.

"Boy, you sure know how to ride 'em!" old Abe yelled.

"Sure 'nuff! Didn't I tell you I was a good rider?"

The old cook was busy throwing in his pots and pans and locking up his chuck box. Dick kept his eye on his own bed. He saw the cook roll it up and throw it down in the bed wagon. That was too much! Dick had to ride off to laugh with himself.

When the boys were all saddled, most of them set out for the cattle they were bringing in. When the cavvy was turned loose the boss told Dick to help drive it to the ranch. Dick took down his rope and went after them on a run, yelling, whooping and chasing them hell-west and crooked, flopping all over his saddle till it rattled the old plug. It didn't take the boys long to catch up to him and tell him in plain language "that wasn't no way to drive a cavvy."

"Glad you told me," Dick said. "I want to do it the right way. Different outfits has different ways, I reckon. Back home you wouldn't be a cowboy 'less you drove 'em on a run!"

"Well, son it's different out here. We kinda take things easy. This outfit don't have to work very hard."

CHAPTER IX

Cyclone

THEY hit the old Two Bar K ranch in the flank of the evening. It was on high ground and the buildings showed plainly through the red tint of evening. There were acres of big corrals; a lofty red barn rose above the bunkhouses, granaries and saddle sheds. A large, rambling frame ranch house spread out among a few scrubby cottonwood trees, heavy branched at the bottom and dwarfed in height from the wear and pull of the hard winds.

As they rode up Dick saw many people stirring about the yards and the first thing he didn't like—a lot of them had dresses on. That wasn't so good! He wondered if they'd be in the way and if the women in that country ever showed up around the corrals, or if they rode, or what the devil they were doing there! He couldn't think of any place where they might belong.

Dick was head-shy when he came in for supper. The chuck house was a big long affair, with two rows of tables and a kitchen in one end. The odor of hot biscuits, frying beefsteak and coffee made him hungry all of a sudden. He was jerked right up to a stop! There were two ladies doing the cooking. Four young girls with white aprons were waiting on the tables.

Ducking his head, he went to the first stall that was vacant. He was wishing he had never seen the Two Bar K, when the girls asked him if he would have more meat and coffee. He nodded his head. The girl handed it to him and in his excitement he spilled the coffee all over the table. He shook his head and looked down at the table. His face went a strawberry red and beads of sweat popped out all over his forehead.

"What's the matter, Bronc?" one of the boys laughed. "Can't you stand fer a gal winkin' at you? You're so good lookin'—you'll have a lot of that. Any real bronc fighter on this outfit runs the risk of havin' one of these gals kidnap him."

The girls tee-heed and looked straight at him. Dick shoved his chair back and left on a high trot. A roar of laughter followed him. He was quitting before breakfast. To his hard luck he found the cavvy had been chased out for the night and his horses with them. The outfit was set for a joke and they weren't going to be cheated.

The next morning the hands went to the dipping pens at the south side of the corral. Here were vats about a hundred feet long where they dipped the

cattle for the mange. The mange was a scabby skin disease left on the prairies by the buffalo. The cattle's hair came off in sports and a yellow oily scab like thick dandruff coated their bodies a quarter of an inch thick. It was on the inside of their carcass as well as the outside and often ate in until it killed them or made them so poor they died during the hard winters.

Dick had worked on these dipping roundups and he hated the sight of them—the milling and bawling cattle, cursed and chased by the cowboys as they pounded through the corrals and into the chutes. He shook his head and walked away, just as the cook hammered the breakfast gong on the old triangle that hung on the end of the cook shack.

Dick looked at the chuck house a bit shyly, felt of his belt and his appetite. For half a dime he wouldn't show up! But his appetite was something to reckon with.

He made a run and landed with the main bunch so he wouldn't be noticed. He dropped his head and went to work on the hot cakes. He was making it all right till the old fool Abe Carter came in. He slapped his hand on Dick's head and ruffled his hair.

"Look out, Bronc," he said, "you better duck! Here comes a girl!"

Dick's bashfulness boiled into anger.

"Let 'em come!" he yelled. "I don't reckon they're much worse than a fightin' cow and I've stood off a few of them!"

He was mad enough to be plenty brassy. Abe saw him clinch his fork in his hand and knew the joke had gone far enough. When the girl came around by Dick he looked straight at her and asked her for more coffee.

He'd thoroughly made up his mind that these things were scattered all over the world and he was going to have to get used to them. Then he saw color flush the girl's face and she dropped her eyes before his bold stare, spilling the coffee as she passed. The score had been evened! What's more—he'd found out how to do it.

BY the time Dick finished his breakfast and got out to the corral the saddle horses were in. Abe was right on his heels.

"Well, Bronc," he said, "what do you think of that bunch? Kin you ride 'em?"

"Yes, sir, Mister! Any part of 'em!"

"Boy, you're takin' in a lot of territory, ain't you?"

"That's all right," Dick said. "I was raised on a lot of it. My pa says I was one of the best riders in Possum County, Missouri."

Dick didn't know for a certainty that there was a Missouri—let alone a Possum County!

"Well, boy, do you want to bet a little on it—you kin ride 'em?"

"Sure! I'll bet a dollar!"

"A whole dollar?" Abe hollered. Some of the boys were crowding in. The fun was starting! One of them spouted up.

"Why—that ain't 'nuff to saddle a horse fer! I seen you have more money than thet."

"Yes, but by darn, it was hard to earn and my ma said not to take no chance with it!"

A sag pulled the boys' faces. This wasn't going to be so easy. They'd have to coax him on a bit. He was as careful as he was green. The roundup cook crowded up through the bunch, determined that he was going to have some money out of Bronc. He took hold of Dick's shoulder.

"Why, you can't even ride that littlest black horse over thar in the bunch!"

Dick looked at the horse. He was a small willow-tailed pony. Dick laughed.

"Wal—I'll bet I *can* ride that little devil! I'll jest bet you two and a half right away!"

The cook pulled out his two and a half.

"Here it is! Let the boss hold the stakes."

Dick fished around in his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills. Ten dollars was the smallest one. He asked the boys if any of them could change it.

"Change it?" the boss said. "Why don't you bet it all? You won't never be a real cowpuncher till you've made a bet or two!"

"All right, then!" Dick swaggered. "Who wants it?"

The old cook covered it quickly. The black mustang was brought out. Dick said he didn't want to put his new saddle on it. A pony like that might run into a fence and scratch it all up.

So they spent about twenty minutes getting another saddle and fitting the stirrups to Dick. They stuck it on the pony and one of the boys eared it down while Dick sneaked up to it. Dick looked around at them and laughed.

"Umm! That horse won't buck. Look how quiet he's standin'! Anybody can ride him!"

The punchers were all nudging each other and laughing. One of the punchers ran up to Dick.

"Want to bet some of that roll?"

"Yes, sir! I'll bet another ten. That will make it twenty."

The puncher covered it and Dick looked around. The whole top of the corral fence was lined with cowpunchers, ranch hands, visitors and everything else.

On top of the flat roof of the shed against the corral sat the whole female force, the cooks, the girls that waited on the table and the boss's wife. Dick was muddled for a minute. Mrs. Carter was on the warpath. She was a kind-hearted woman and had seen and heard those cowpunchers jobbing kids before and she didn't like it.

"Don't you bet with that kid and take all his money!"

Old Abe silenced her with a motion of his hand. The girls took a hand.

"If the boy's goin' to ride, let us hold the stakes. We'll sure get his money for him if he wins."

"That's right," the lady put in, "if the kid does win they'll keep his money and buy whisky with it."

This idea was helping Dick out. He thought they were safer hands to hold stakes. The money passed up to the women folks. Dick started up to the black pony, hollering, "Whoa! whoa! Whoa, pony!"

Everybody was laughing.

"Don't whoa that pony!" the boss yelled. "He don't understand farm language!"

Dick started up the wrong side of it and the boss stopped him.

"No! No! Git on the other side, Bronc!"

The women on the top of the shed commenced to protest again.

"You're not goin' to put that kid on that mean horse, if we have to come down and stop you!"

Abe brought them to silence again with the wave of his hand. By this time Dick was up on the horse, telling the boy that was holding to his ears to hold tight until he got his seat. Dick twisted around in the saddle, took his hat in his hand and hollered, "Let 'im go!"

The cowboy let loose, jumped back and threw his hat under him. The willow-tailed pony shot straight out for twenty feet and lit humped up like a rainbow, squealed and bucked off across the corral, sagging and twisting. Dick wabbled all over the saddle, putting up a freak ride. When the pony went up in the air again he grabbed the horn with both hands and hollered, "Whoa! whoa! Catch him!"

Dick was riding all over him and he let his head flop as if it was about to break his neck. The cowboys on the fence yelled, "Ride him!" The women froze to their spots. One screamed, "Catch that pony! He'll kill the kid!"

THE pony reared and jumped ahead in the air and kicked out behind. When the pony made another high jump Dick loosened and the pony left him sitting in mid-air.

The women folks screamed as Dick rolled over in the dirt. He rose, wiping his face with his sleeve. The cowboys yelped like coyotes, the cook started over for his money. The women folks refused to hand it to him and asked Dick if he was hurt.

"Nope!" he said, spitting out a mouthful of dirt. "Give him his money. I got some more."

The cook took it.

"Well, son, you'll have better luck next time."

"I hope so." Dick said gloomily.

They caught the pony and Dick insisted on getting back on. Everybody sat quiet as Dick crawled up in the middle of him. The willow-tail did the same thing. Dick rode a little closer that time and by pulling leather he pretended he managed to stay on. The women cheered him and said it was too bad he didn't ride him the first time and save his money. Dick swelled up.

"See? I told you I could ride him!"

"Well—why didn't you do it the first time?" one of the boys yelled.

"I didn't think he was goin' to buck so long, or I'd got a better hold when he started."

"U n h u h!" they grunted as Dick walked off.

He looked through the cavvy for his own horses but he could not find them. He asked Abe Carter if that was all the bunch. The boss told him it was. He naturally thought some of the boys were pulling a trick on Dick and had left the horses in the pasture. That's what Dick thought, but he said nothing. The boys cluttered around and commenced to blow him up, telling him he'd sure make a good rider and how hard the pony bucked. Dick spit a little heavily and straightened up.

"Give me a cigarette!" he said to the boss.

"Sure, that's the idee, boy! You'll learn to ride better and quicker if you smoke cigarettes. We all do it!"

In the afternoon they corralled another bunch. Dick was sitting up on the fence pointing at them, saying he bet he could ride this one and that one. The punchers were getting enthused, perking up and sticking close to him. One of them pointed towards a big buckskin horse and winked. Dick crawled down off the fence and went to look him over. The old boss saw the bait coming up.

"Hey, Bronc! Do you think you could ride that horse?"

"Sure 'nuff!" Dick said. "He's a big horse—there's more to hold on to. Besides these big ones is awkward. They ain't half as fast as the little ones. I always could ride big horses! Pa's old Nell was a big horse. There's a lot of difference in big ones and them little old tiny ones a feller can't lock his spurs into. When they git doubled up, you can't see anything in front of you only the saddle horn. You can't watch their head and tell which way they're going!"

Some of the boys nearly choked trying to keep from laughing out loud, but Dick went on, "Them big ones can't hide their head like that. I'd bet all I got I could ride him!"

Business picked up. Down off the fence came the cowpunchers and commenced to josh Dick.

"Why don't you do it then? You don't know what you're talkin' about. That big horse is Cyclone. That's the horse that won the championship as a bucker down in Cheyenne one year."

"Aw, pooh!" Dick drawled. "You're jest tryin' to scare me out. Them big horses can't buck, I tell you. Besides some of you has hid my ponies out some place and you're goin' to try to make me ride that little black one to find them."

Dick was a bit excited. They were coming to him at last. He pretended he was mad. One of them caught the buckskin. Dick knew what he was, the minute the rope hit him. He was an old horse that had bucked a lot and, accustomed to handling, was quiet till a fellow got on him. Dick walked over, looked at him, petted him on the neck and then laughed at the boys.

"See? That horse ain't a bit mean! He don't care what you do to him!"

"Course not," they agreed wickedly.

The crowd was up on its toes. Every man was afraid he wouldn't get his bet. Their hands were on their money. The old boss, Abe Carter, walked around the corral. Dick figured his conscience was hurting him.

"Well, saddle him up!" Dick yelled. "I'll bet you all you want to bet. I'll bet you a month's wages!"

The old cook grunted. "Is that all?"

"Wal—you been pretty good to me. I'll bet a hundred dollars with you, but I don't want to take yer money."

The boys stampeded for some of it, but the old cook held them back.

"Lay easy here, you bloodhounds! This is my bet!"

The cook pulled out his money.

"No—let's make it fifty!" Dick stalled.

"Uhuh? Going back on me, eh? You can't pull that! You bet a hundred and I called it!"

"All right!" Dick grumbled and rolled out his money. "Will you give me half of it back if I do happen to get throwed off?"

"Nope—you wouldn't give it back if you won, would you?"

"Wal—m a y b e I wouldn't," Dick grunted.

"We wouldn't want you to," some of the boys added. "We're not Indians. A bet's a bet!"

Dick flustered up.

"What do you think I am—an Injin?"

"You sound like one," the cook said.

Then Dick did act mad. He talked loud and dug in his pockets for all his money.

"I'll bet you all I got," he said, "and I won't bawl for it back either."

DICK looked around. The women folks were back on the shed listening to every word, trying to get the boys to stop. Dick shelled out three hundred dollars and yelled, "Cover that!"

Fifties, tens and twenties flew at Dick's pile. They figured it up. The cook had one hundred dollars covered, the rest of the boys covered two hundred. The boss's wife called down from the top of the shed:

"If you fellers don't leave that boy alone, we'll report you!"

"Go to the house if you don't want to see it!" old Abe answered. "This kid's gettin' a bit fresh!"

The cook held the money in one of the boy's hats. Dick didn't like the idea. He insisted on the women holding the money or he wouldn't ride. He'd take his money and go. The cook passed it up to them.

The buckskin horse was already saddled. Dick walked towards him. Cyclone held his head straight out, with one ear loped back as his eyes walled around. Dick "knowed them markings." He had a real ride coming!

He tightened up the belt on his fancy chaps, pulled his hat down, then backed up and adjusted his spurs, loosening them one more hole on the strap so they would hang well down on his heels. The boys looked at one another. They "knowed them markings!"

When Dick slipped up to the side of Cyclone the boy was putting the blindfold on him. Dick grabbed the hackamore rope and yelled.

"Give him to me 'cause we're goin' to ride!"

With one flip he jerked off the blind. With a catlike spring he jumped and grabbed the saddle horn and lit in the saddle. Cyclone quivered a little as Dick jammed both his spurs into his shoulders. Up they went! The buckskin hit the ground like a pile-driver. Dick yelled and the horse grunted. He went up again, turned his belly half way up in a sunfish, swapped ends and lit going the other way. He was airing the bottoms of his feet!

Straight ahead for seven high crooked jumps. Every jump made the buckskin madder. They were both busy! Dick waved his hat at the ladies. Not a sound came from the cowboys. The women yelled and laughed as Dick played a tattoo on Cyclone's ribs with his spurs. The horse reared and half fell. Dick loosened one stirrup but came up sitting tight to his saddle again. The buckskin bucked across the corral and stopped with his head in a corner.

The cowboys threw their hats at him. They wanted to see Dick go sprawling. The buckskin turned again, madder and with more speed, but Dick yelped like a coyote and hollered, "Ride 'im, cowboy!"

The women were dazed and crazy with relief. They couldn't believe their eyes. It was the first time they'd ever seen the old buckskin ridden, and he'd thrown many! This time Cyclone was drawing the surprise! He couldn't shed his human!

Dick was sitting with his easy balance and fanning the old boy with his hat for more action. It took the heart out of the old bucker. He stopped and went into a sulk in the middle of the corral—thoroughly jobbed for once in his life. Dick kicked out of his stirrups and jumped clear of him, landing feet first on the ground.

Not a puncher moved from the fence. Their money had taken wings. There wasn't a grunt left in them!

"How do you like that?" Dick hollered. "I can ride anything you got! Perhaps you won't be so anxious to job farmer boys next time. That mail-order saddle I got I bought from Pete—the kid you jobbed a few days ago. I reckon it's paid for itself!"

The boys crawled from the fence mighty glum. Dick walked over to get his money. Old Abe was laughing till his eyes swam shut. As luck had it, he hadn't been fast enough to get in on the bets. His wife had seen to that.

He spent the rest of the afternoon telling the boys that he knew that kid wasn't a greenhorn and he was glad they got a good jobbing—though he felt kinda sorry for Cyclone. But they all knew he was tooting his own horn and

not making much noise at that! Dick was glad it happened that way. He needed a friend like the boss just then.

The women folks came a little closer, eyeing Dick. He got a bit uncomfortable and moved out to find his horses. He had plenty of money if he had lost them!

It wasn't till the next day that Dick found out it was no joke. His horses had either been seen alone in the pasture and stolen by some drifting horse thief or else got out. He was hoping they would hit for the Rocking H. The code in that country was, when horses were traveling straight through, for everybody to leave them alone. They'd be headed home.

He hustled up old Abe and tried to buy the buckskin, Cyclone. Abe Carter heard him out, but refused to sell the horse. The fun he got out of keeping him around to educate would-be riders was worth more than the money.

Dick changed his plans. He would travel as light as possible. He sold his bed to one of the ranch hands, threw his greenhorn saddle and outfit in the buckboard and went to town with the ranch hustler.

CHAPTER X

Death Trap

NEXT morning found Dick on the prowl early. He had heard of a man who owned a gray bucking horse. He kept him to put on small exhibitions in the town and the chin-whiskered fathers would bet their quarters and half-dollars on him. They'd take up a collection for the man that would ride the horse—the owner keeping half.

Dick found the horse, a big, fine animal over eleven hundred pounds. He was a dapple gray with a heavy black mane and tail, large intelligent eyes set well out, leaving plenty of room between them for brains. He held his head like a peacock. It was a thoroughbred's head, with wide sensitive nostrils and ears that pricked constantly with caution. Fire flashed in his keen eyes as he stepped about nervously. The muscles on his trim legs bulged with power. His silver gray hair glistened in the sunlight. He reminded Dick of an Arabian stallion.

The horse was easy to handle. A saddle was the only thing he hated. Dick petted him all over, picked up his feet and pulled his tail. He knew he was going to have that horse whether money could buy him or not. The old guy he propositioned shot the price up to five hundred dollars. He didn't need the money because he was comfortably fixed, but he needed sport more than bread and butter. Argument was beyond his way of thinking. He refused to sell.

But he was game for Dick to take him on the town square and ride him for a collection. Dick saw possibilities looming up. The horse was led to the square, the alarm sounded and out flocked the town's whole population. Tittering, gabbling young folks, old women with their house dresses on, even wheel chairs, were brought into view. Clerks and storekeepers locked their doors and came out.

Dick didn't like the idea of riding the horse with his tack of a saddle and no other rider mounted to pick him up. But the old fellow reassured him. The horse was easy to handle as soon as he quit bucking.

"Tut! tut! No use bein' scairt of Gray Boy!" the owner said, rubbing his hands with excitement.

An idea flashed in Dick's head. He saddled up. They passed the hat. The owner took out his half, amounting to five dollars, and Dick pocketed the other half. The old guy rubbed the horse's head and talked to him. When he wasn't looking, Dick loosened the buckle on the halter and swung on. The halter slipped off. The horse's head was free! Dick was riding him without a bridle or rein.

Dick hit the gray horse with both spurs behind the front legs under the edge of the cinch. Away they went! Dick swung the halter and fanned him on the head with it. The gray made several crooked jumps. The crowd yelled. Dick was riding him easy, whipping him with the halter and digging his spurs deeper into his girth. That stops bucking quicker than anything.

"Throw him off, Gray Boy," the owner hollered.

But the spurs got too rough. Up went his head. He ran right through the crowd. Dick slapped him on the side of the head with the halter and turned him up the main street.

"Catch him! Catch him! He's runnin' away!" Dick yelled as up the main stem they ran like a cyclone. Dick hit him and turned him to the south on a narrow street that ran out through the edge of town. Again and again he guided him with the swinging halter until he had shot Gray Boy up a back trail to the river.

When they hit the down slope of the river it was plenty steep. Gray Boy threw on his brakes and slid his hind feet. Dick was glad to see the town go out of sight. He chuckled at the thought of the old codgers standing around waiting for him to return. In the meantime he was running the gray out of wind and he wouldn't be bucking any more.

When Dick hit pasture fences along the river, he shot the horse off into the stream, went past them and then out again. The gray was taming fast. They came out in the middle of a thick patch of brush. It was a good hiding place. Dick locked his arms around his neck and slid off. The gray halted. Dick put his halter on and tied him out of sight. He slipped down the river and hid himself in some overhanging brush.

THE pounding of horses' hoofs roused him. A dozen riders galloped past. They were looking for him, all right. Dick lay still and chuckled as they rode past the patch of brush where the gray was anchored. Gray Boy never whinnied to give them away. The horse was playing the game with him.

As soon as the riders were out of sight, Dick slipped up to Gray Boy to congratulate him. He wasn't moving yet. The riders would come back. Dick sat still for an hour or so. When he heard horses' hoofs again, he rose and held his hand over the gray's nostrils, ready to squeeze if he started to nicker. The men were excited and worn out. They covered the river bottom looking for tracks. One of the riders yelled:

"That horse either run down the river or else he went up. He might have killed the kid by now. If he's still with that gray devil, he ought to have him. I'm fer goin' home."

The river was roaring in front of Dick as they plowed through the heavy brush. Suddenly they brought up sharply on the river's edge. He plunged Gray Boy into it and felt the swift current shake him. For a second the horse scrambled for footing—then down they went! The icy waters chilled Dick to the bone, but Gray Boy had come up plunging and swimming like a machine. Dick thought they'd never get across. He was a bit frightened as well as cold, drenched and hungry. But Gray Boy struck solid ground as suddenly as he had left it. They pulled out and pushed on up the bank.

The brush maddened Dick. It clawed at him and whipped him over his cold wet hands. The moon dropped behind the clouds, the great country pressed its looming outlines against Dick and he experienced that inky black a man hears about but never feels till he is out and lost alone.

Dick gave up all hope of getting out of the brush before daybreak. Gray Boy didn't need any coaxing to quit. Dick hobbled him out and for the first time in his life had to hunt for ground level to curl up in his saddle blanket. Before long he heard the glad sound of Gray Boy munching on some grass and he fell asleep planning how he'd lead him to a big feed and a long rest.

When daylight broke, Dick woke to strange noises: the call of birds that never visited the prairie country, the roar of mountain streams and the constant hiss of the wind through the tops of tall pines.

The Big Chief was northwest of him now. In the clear morning air he imagined he could stick out his hand and touch it. It was the biggest, tallest, roughest thing he had ever seen. He could not figure how it got there or what awful twist had thrown it up from the prairies. From its top one should see the whole world!

Gray Boy raised his head and nickered as Dick whistled. The short hours of rest had freshened him. Dick saddled him carefully and spent some time telling him the shortest way to a meal was straight ahead into Uncle Sam's country and not up and down where the birds fly.

Gray Boy had his own ideas about traveling. After milling about in the brush, Gray Boy, by flipping his head with short quick tosses and fighting the bridle reins, got it across to Dick that he knew more about the country than Dick gave him credit for.

With a laugh Dick turned him loose. The horse soon jogged onto a trail and struck the river again where it made a bend and came down from the south. Soon Dick saw pastures with horses in them and snuggled up against the east bank was a chimney belching smoke.

Dick landed a hearty breakfast for himself and Gray Boy, but the Double Circle ranch was running full handed. He was to find it a common complaint as he moved on.

He knocked around from one ranch to another for a month. The ranches were all small. Most of them lay on the river bottoms or were tucked away at the foot of a mountain. His ears and eyes were always open and he learned fast. Everything was different.

Dick always found a welcome at these small ranches, but none of them had any work. They held only what they could work themselves. They refused to let him pay his way, and that always moved him on. Dick had to be a working part of anything he stayed with.

BIG outfits were few and far between. A country where work was scarce was new to him and by the time a month had passed Dick was disheartened. He had heard of the Turkey Track ranch which ran several thousand cattle and two or three hundred head of horses. It lay north and west of Browning, Montana, the Indian Agency for the Blackfoot Indians, and the ranch was run for their welfare. Dick headed for it and to his surprise had no trouble getting on the payroll.

But things were different! The cowpunchers were not friendly. Every man toted a gun. Many of them were half and quarter breed Blackfoot Indians—a dark, greasy looking bunch. A secretive atmosphere hung over them. They were sullen and acted as if it was a favor for them to answer a question. In the bunkhouses they sat for hours without talking.

At first Dick felt cold and wondered what was wrong and what he had done to make them thataway. As he worked for the outfit, he found it was their custom. The foreman was hard-boiled and snapped out his orders. His name was Flint—a large burly fellow with surly face and long black mustaches. His idea of running an outfit was to work his men as long as the light lasted.

The country was full of people on the rim of the law. Horse stealing was one of its outstanding industries. It made Dick feel easier about Gray Boy. The times were fewer when he remembered how Gray Boy had run off with him, but the atmosphere around the place wasn't burning him up to trot Gray Boy back to the man who had refused five hundred dollars for the transfer of him—a thing that had happened anyway.

When Dick went to work on the Turkey Track, Gray Boy went to pasture. Being the kid of the outfit, he drew the poor end of the saddle horses—old plugs ready to be pensioned, sore backs and ringtailed ponies.

One morning Dick rolled out ready to leave. He told Flint he was quitting. When Flint asked why, Dick told him it wasn't any fun to punch cows in a rough brush country, climbing up and down steep trails all day and moving as slow as the second coming of molasses. The horses were worse than walking and dragging a stick of wood. Flint twisted his mustaches, his black eyes flashed.

"Ha, young feller!" he growled, "Kickin' at the horses, eh? Well, they ain't no kids in this country ridin' the top horses. Furthermore, if a horse had pep enough to move, you couldn't ride him!"

Dick flared like a torch.

"Is that so? There's not a damn horse on this outfit I can't ride!"

Flint snorted and gave his mustaches another twist.

"Is it you talkin'—or is it yer money?"

"It's me!" Dick bellowed. "And my money! I've got twenty dollars"—that was as much as he dared flash and he fished it from his watch pocket—"and the month's wages I got comin' from you. I'll bet her all that I can ride any horse you got!"

Flint saw his chance for easy money. One of the boys brought in the saddle horses with a war whoop. They caught a large sorrel horse with a Roman nose and lantern jaw. He was built like a knot—short and stout—a bit humped-back. His neck and head hung low and his snaky eyes rolled in their sockets. The boys saddled him, with a contest saddle Dick had borrowed, and changed the stirrups to fit.

Dick socked his spurs into the sorrel's neck and raked them down over his shoulders as he hit him with his hat. The sorrel sprung ahead, knocking down the cowboy that held him. The loose dust in the corral boiled up, and soon all that could be seen was a figure jumping and squealing.

When the dust cleared Dick was still in the middle of his horse. The latter was standing quiet. The boys booed him and threw their hats at him. Dick gave him another rake with his spurs, but he only sulked.

"Look, boss!" one smarty yelled. "That kid's ruined the best bucker we had on the outfit!"

Dick should have smelled a rat right there. Flint crawled down from the fence, cussing. When Dick went to collect his money, the stakeholder laughed in his face.

"No—no, boy! You don't get off with one chance. You earn this before you git it!"

"I have!" Dick spit back. "What kind of sports are you?"

"You'll find out!" Flint laughed. "We believe in treatin' the outfit. Hey! One of you boys slip across the border into Cardston and fetch back a batch of whisky with the kid's money. He wants you to put on a party—but if anyone stops you, forget you ever seen the Turkey Track. I don't want no one to find out a young kid is spoilin' the morals of a good, law-abidin' Indian outfit!"

THE next day the boys returned with the booze. Dick was on hand with the rest of them and had a couple of drinks. It looked as if the outfit was planning to take a swim, not a drink. They had jugs, bottles and flasks in the pack outfit and tied all over their saddles.

The boys hooted at Dick and drank to his health. He had never seen fellows gulp whisky like hogs before. They stampeded like bulls for a waterhole. Every drink was a long guzzle and it came up cussing.

It was getting noisier all the time. The men began shooting at the knot holes in the ceiling and the floor—at the door knobs and the bunk posts. It was about the worst show Dick had ever seen put on. He didn't know sixty dollars could stir up so much hell.

When he figured they were too drunk to see him, Dick got his own outfit together and Gray Boy and slipped them down the canyon, where he tied Gray Boy out of sight. Then he went back to the bunkhouse. He had "even-up" on his mind.

As he entered the door, one of the boys yelled:

"Look who we got with us! The buckin'est jug in Montana! Got any more money to bet, Kid?"

Flint, the old boss, gave a fiendish yell and tightened his belt.

"I'll show that young buzzard he's not runnin' this country!"

He whipped out his gun and yelled for Dick to dance. Dick started with an old clog dance he had learned from the boys.

"More and faster!" Flint yelled as he shot into the floor close to Dick's feet. He kept shooting. Dick was a bit scared, but danced on. The other boys took it up. Soon chips flew from the floor around Dick. They were shooting mighty reckless! He was looking for a getaway. These half-breeds full of liquor were bad medicine! He knew that if he tried to run, they were wild enough to plug him. Suddenly he stopped, out of breath.

"You guys ought to give a feller a drink!" he puffed.

Another volley of bullets tore into the floor. One hit Dick in the foot halfway up the instep and a little round hole appeared on his tight boot. There was a stinging numbness in his foot. He sat down on the floor.

"Shoot—you damn bullies, if you want to!" he yelled.

The whole crowd jeered.

"You ought to dance fast enough to keep yer feet out of the way!" Flint hollered. "Serves you right!"

Something new crept into Dick. He rose to his feet, made one spring at old Flint and knocked him and his chair sprawling across the floor. Four or five of the boys grabbed him. Flint came up cursing and gritting his yellow teeth. His mustaches bristled and his black eyes flashed. Dick saw all hell let loose in them. The man was wild with whisky and anger.

"Hold that young devil!" he bawled.

The boys bent Dick over a chair while Flint beat him mercilessly over the hips and back with a wide leather belt. Dick

never yelped. He gritted his teeth while they laid on the punishment. When they let him up, his whole world was different. It was black and he was shooting through it like forked lightning striking and scarring as he went. He staggered to a bunk and fell on it. His anger had hit the blue pitch that injustice whips into a man.

Hours later he came to. His foot was burning like fire. The pain was too great to stand. He pulled and tugged at his boot to get it off, but his foot was too swollen. He pulled out his jackknife and cut off the boot. Once it was off the rush of blood to his foot sickened him. The tightness had stopped the bleeding but left the foot stiff and coated. The pain made him dizzy.

He struggled to his feet, his head throbbing. He limped about the room and gathered up every gun he could find. Not a man stirred, though Dick stumbled and swore as he climbed about in the confusion. He scooped them up in his arms, limped out and threw them in the creek—all but two of the best forty-five six-shooters, which he kept for himself. From now on he would be using them!

THE sun was just coming up. The ranch lay quiet. By this time they were generally through breakfast, but today no smoke rose from the cook shack. Dick had several things to do. He had to find a boot big enough for his swollen foot—and it must be bathed. He limped back to the bunkhouse. Whisky was good for pain so he took a couple of drinks and poured some on his foot. It burnt for a minute—then felt good. He filled a wash basin and bathed his foot. It gave him real relief.

There was only one boot in the bunkhouse that looked big enough for his sore foot and Flint was wearing it. Dick grabbed Flint's foot and tugged at the boot. Flint grunted, twisted his foot a time or two and then sat up, blinking his eyes. When he spotted Dick, he reeled out an ugly drunken oath.

"So it's you, unh?" he sneered.

Dick shoved his one gun full cocked in his face.

"If you make a sound, I'll kill you. Pull off that boot. I want it!"

Flint saw that the kid meant business, but he wasn't going to let him get away with it. He sat on the edge of the bed, sizing Dick up. The thought of a kid putting one over angered him past control. He was plumb sober by now. He looked Dick in the eye, trying to bluff him out.

"You young buzzard! You dasn't shoot!"

Dick's face set white; he tightened on his gun. When Flint saw that wouldn't work, he carefully slipped his boot off, gripped it with one hand and with a swift throw knocked the gun from Dick's hand. It fell between them. Flint pounced on it thinking of nothing else. But Dick was too fast. He jerked out his other gun and with a long swipe he smashed Flint above the ear.

Flint fell face down on the floor, gripping the gun. Dick trampled his hand loose, picked the gun up and shoved it in his belt. The old brute had got what was coming to him. A big gash above the ear was running a pool of blood on the floor.

Cartridges were next. He stumbled about the room after he had slipped on Flint's boot. It was all he could do to navigate, but he knew where most of the men kept their shells and he cleaned them out. There was one more thing to be done. The Turkey Track was going to be afoot when it came out of its drunken fog. He limped to the corrals and turned out all the horses, even the big stallions. Then he mounted Gray Boy and turned down the trail.

CHAPTER XI

The Wolf's Lair

SUNDOWN found them in rolling ridges covered with buffalo grass. They were southwest of Sweet Grass, gaining on the homestead country where farmers had settled during the Montana boom and now merely eked out an existence. Most of their houses were half-roofed shacks, built with the intention of adding to them some day.

Dick traveled due east for miles till the heat of the sun and the constant shake of the horse made everything look red. He rubbed his eyes and looked. The Sweet Grass Buttes were close. It was the badlands country, where deep bare canyons ran east and west and only a few barbed wire fences were to be seen.

He gripped the horn of his saddle to keep from falling off. Gray Boy, tired

and hungry, walked carefully as if he knew Dick might spill. Dick managed to tie the bridle reins and drop them on Gray Boy's neck. A haggard thought pounded at him: "Keep goin'!" He never knew how long he hung on like grim death, but it seemed they dragged along for hours.

The next Dick knew, he was lying in a bunk in a low roofed, dimly lighted room. Wooden pegs were driven into the log walls, pack saddles, ropes and old clothes hung on them. A sharp stinging pain shot up his leg. Then he remembered.

Somebody was bathing his foot. He had been picked up. He had been dancing at the Turkey Track. The logs on the ceiling were like those of the bunkhouse. He raised himself quickly, feeling for his guns, but he didn't get more than his head up.

"If you don't lay still, boy, you won't be worth no more than a dead jackrabbit."

He flopped back and lay still, willing to take whatever came. He didn't care. The light hurt his eyes. He held them shut till he reasoned it out that he was not at the Turkey Track. The place did not smell rotten enough, and no one there would take care of a sick dog—much less a man.

The bathing stopped. The voice spoke again. It sounded far off and was soft like a boy's.

"You sure got the worst foot I ever seen. It's all black and swelled three times its size. It will take all the wits you got to pull through. I'm tellin' you there's been many a feller kick out with a foot not half that bad. If you act decent and lay still I'll do what I kin. I ain't got a lot of time to spend on you here—my chores has to be done."

Before the big talk was finished Dick had taken the jolt of his life. The voice belonged to a girl! Now he was afraid to look. A girl taking care of him! He felt hot and burning, but he held himself rigid as he had been told. He dozed off again, trying to figure where he was and where was his memory and Gray Boy and his guns. It was all mixed up. His thoughts whirled round and round. He couldn't find words to fit them.

When he came to again, the long shadows and soft lights slanting through the small window gave Dick the feel of the sunset hour. The place was quiet. His throat was dry. He wanted water and fresh air. He called, but nobody answered. Raising himself slowly to his elbows, then up in a sitting position, he looked at his foot, swollen and black.

A grim smile came over his face as he wiggled his foot. The pain that grabbed it was going to keep him quiet in spite of himself. Through a small window on the east side of the house he saw the Sweet Grass Buttes. They looked right next door. As the red tint of sundown touched the patches of timber that towered above the house, they stood out like a picture with a blue sky behind.

Footsteps were coming up the path. It was boots, all right, the heels clicked on the hard walk. A minute later the girl tiptoed through the kitchen. Dick stared at her. She was dressed in overalls with the legs stuffed down her boot tops and a blue denim shirt, open at the neck.

Except for the roundness of her face she looked more like a boy than a girl. Her hair cut short was light where it showed beneath the rim of a big black hat. She had soft blue eyes. When she smiled she showed a row of white teeth. It was the first thing Dick noticed about them. He wanted to see them flash again.

"Feeling better, boy?" she asked, as with a wide, sure throw she hooked her hat on the deer horns over the rifles.

"Quite a bit!" Dick answered. "Where am I?"

"Well, you're far enough away that the Turkey Track outfit won't find you. They leave us alone!"

Dick noted the sureness with which she said "us" and wondered. The Turkey Track was plenty hard. He couldn't imagine anything so tough they would leave it alone.

"The Turkey Track? What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well—you've been ravin' about a man named Flint and the Turkey Track and what you was goin' to do to them, ever since I pulled you off your horse last night. We know that outfit," the girl laughed assuredly; "they're 'way over against the foot of the Rockies. Did you have a mix-up over there?"

DICK looked down. There wasn't anything about his stay with the Turkey Track he wanted to remember, let

alone boast about it. He resented the girl's knowledge of him.

"Did you pack me in here?" he asked.

"Well, you wasn't walkin' when I found you."

The girl turned to the kitchen and began laying the firewood.

"They tell me they're a bad lot!" she called back over her shoulder. But Dick never answered.

"Kin I have a drink?"

"Yes, in jest a minute. I got to fetch it from the spring. It's kept me humpin' to do all the chores today, with you here and the old man gone."

"You here all alone?"

The surprise in Dick's voice brought the girl to the door. She flashed a careless smile at him.

"What of it? Been alone for a week. Sometimes pop leaves me here two months at a time. Don't know as it makes much difference when he's here as far as the chores go. He's either tradin' and buyin' horses or drunk half his time."

"Who is your pop?"

"You mean to say you don't know where you are?"

Dick shook his head.

"Hain't never heard of Ben Snyder?" the girl said slowly as she came to the foot of the bed. He knew the girl had told him something, the way her head went up and her words rang with pride or fear. He shook his head again.

"The Wolfe?" the girl insisted.

"Sure I've heard of the Wolfe—but that ain't yer pop!"

Something about the surprise in Dick's voice pleased the girl. They both laughed to hide their confusion. It came to the girl that maybe her pop wasn't much to brag about in Dick's mind. Dick was trying to connect stories he had heard of the dreaded Wolfe with the soft-voiced girl before him.

"Yep!" she said slowly, "that's my pop."

The girl returned to the kitchen and stirred about, getting supper. Wolfe was the man that had caused all the trouble up on the Belly River. He had worked for the Yankee Free Traders during the big Buffalo slaughter, and then went to chasing gray wolves, trapping and hunting them for a living. Every man in Canada knew him. He had had several rounds with the Mounted Police and served a term in the penitentiary for killing a man at Edmonton.

Dick had once heard a Cree Indian talk about the Wolfe; but he called him the Gray Wolfe and told of a big fight he had been mixed up in over in the Cypress Mountains, when the horse thieves had been run out by the Mounted Police. He called to the girl and asked her where Gray Boy was.

"What you mean—yer horse?"

Dick nodded.

"Out in pasture." The girl gave the bacon in the frying pan a flip and jammed it down on the hearth next to the coals. "He's all right, but he was about as done as you was. He wasn't any bigger than a jackrabbit around the flank."

Dick laughed.

"Jackrabbits is about all you got to talk of, I reckon."

"Jest 'cause they're as scarce as folks."

She put his supper in front of him on the bed. There was black coffee without cream or sugar, sourdough biscuits from a dutch oven and rusty salt-side bacon with a bit of grease to sop his bread in.

"That's all I got to give you. It ain't much fer a sick man. Wisht I had something else."

Dick looked at her. He thought she was fooling at first. Then his eyes went to a big pile of canned stuff in the corner. She read his thoughts.

"No use you're eyein' that canned junk. That's fer pop! He's got it all counted. He'd beat me to death if I jest touched one can."

Her teeth clicked together and her blue eyes looked anything but soft. Dick had seen that hunger look on animals.

"I wasn't wishin' any," he said quickly, "but is this all you got to eat?"

"Yep—except when pop's here. He divvies up."

DICK fell silent and went to work on his supper. He was hungry and the last crumb was taken eagerly. The girl left him and sat on the hearthstone, eating her own meager meal. The whole layout sickened him. He couldn't forget the hunger in the girl's eye that her manner denied. He was adding work to her full days and cutting her rations in two. He asked for his guns and his belt.

"Say, boy," she said as she laid them on the bed, "maybe it ain't none of my

business, but where did you git that Canadian money? Is that why you got shot through the foot?"

"No," Dick said slowly, wishing he knew how much he had told. "I earned that money."

The girl didn't believe him. He could see that.

"Workin' on the Turkey Track? You can't hand me that! No one ever earned that much workin' there!"

"I lost what I earned there," Dick said; "this—"

"This money I suppose you got from yer dad, Hank Hyde of the Rocking H? That don't sound good either!"

Dick looked her in the eye.

"Hank Hyde ain't my dad. I worked for him a long time and he sure was good to me. If I ever get straightened out, I'm goin' back. I got jobbed at the Turkey Track and they give me this foot to pack along with me. If you won't tell anyone where I come from or what you know about me, I'll give you fifty dollars."

"Fifty dollars?" The girl laughed as if he had asked her to go to the moon. "Pop would take it away from me and beat me half to death."

"When you expectin' your pop back?"

"Week—maybe."

Dick looked glumly at his foot.

"It may be crowdin' this foot, but I reckon it will take me out of your way in that time."

He saw a flash of relief cross the girl's face. It didn't last any longer than the flash of hunger he had seen when she gave him his dinner, but the girl shed fear as if a trap set for her had been sprung before she reached it.

"What you been bathin' it with?" Dick went on.

"Nothin' but salt. That's all I had. Pop has some Five X Horse Liniment. He says it will knock poison out of a bog hole, but I was afraid to use it."

"Let me have it," Dick said, reaching for the bottle she fetched from the kitchen cupboard.

"You lay still!" The girl uncorked the bottle and poured a little in her hand. "If you can keep from wigglin' you'll be doin' yer share!" She rubbed it on the foot. Dick's face turned red. He tried to keep her from seeing what the pain did to him and she pretended she did not see it. Beads of sweat stood all over his face.

"Well I'm going to bed. I have to roll out at daybreak. If you need anything, holler. I'll be in the next room."

"What's yer name?" Dick asked.

"They call me Pat Snyder. I was supposed to be a boy. Pop was powerful mad about it, but I'm tryin' to make up fer it and hold down a boy's job on the outfit."

Dick was still twisting.

"Good night, Pat. My name's Dick."

He was glad when she took the candle and went out. It left him room to think. He was wide-eyed most of the night, but morning brought him rest. Some of the swelling had gone from his foot. The horse liniment was eating in! The girl fixed his foot again before she left.

For five days he lay quiet. His foot was getting better fast. But each new sound jerked him to attention. He was getting some of the girl's itch about the Gray Wolfe. Patsy grew more restless and stern. As the days wore on Dick saw her tense at every strange sound. She was as cool and steady, as able as any man Dick had seen.

The only thing she cared to talk about was the Rocking H ranch. She questioned Dick at length on his life there; but always when Dick got warmed up a caution stole between them and she would walk off as if she suspected Dick had seen her interest. At first he thought nothing of it, but it slowly dawned on Dick that the girl knew more about the Rocking H ranch than if he had been talking for four weeks.

The day came when the girl promised to bring Gray Boy in. Dick was at the corral, waiting for him. He soon saddled and was ready to leave. He offered to pay Pat for taking care of him, but she shook her head.

"No," she said. "The best way you can pay me is by hurryin' out of here and don't tell anybody you ever seen me or this place."

"I'll never say a word," Dick said, "if you keep quiet what you know about me."

He turned Gray Boy and headed for Sweet Grass.

They hit the flat prairie country again going west. Across it in the distance he saw Sweet Grass, Montana—and Coots in Alberta. They looked like one town,

though a national boundary line divided them. When he first saw them, they seemed close at hand; but it took Dick two hours and a half to ride into them.

CHAPTER XII

Badman's End

SWEET GRASS was the railroad door into the still uncharted country of the Canadian Northwest. It was as shabby as any old red depot's door could be. The Great Northern Railroad connected with the A.R. & I. Co.'s Railroad out of Coots, Alberta. Crossing a single dirt street was all it took to pass from one country to another.

On the west side of the single street stood a few houses, saloons, hotels and shacky restaurants, all built of lumber. They hugged the street to catch their share of the stock country's wealth. A couple of grocery stores, with huge lines of second grade wares, had wide doors that were seldom closed.

On the east side were long rows of hitching racks where cow-ponies fought the flies and worried away long hours waiting for a sheepherder or a cowpuncher to spend his roll. A little to the south on the east side lay the railroad switch yards and the red-light district—a huddled bunch of one and two room shacks, covered with tar paper to turn the summer suns and winter blizzards. No tree or green life met the eye—only the dead yellow of summer prairie grass.

Shortly after noon of the third day Dick sat in the livery stable, talking to the owner and listening to the horses champing their grain. A rider pulled up on a bay horse. He stepped off and looked around, first in the office and then down through the stalls, sizing up every horse and its brand.

"Lookin' for somethin'?" the old livery man asked.

"I'm lookin' fer the Wolfe," the puncher shot back. He was a man of about forty-five, with red hair and face, a big fellow with square shoulders and bowlegs.

"The Wolfe ain't been here fer some time," the stable man answered. "Men that hunt him don't often do it a second time," he warned dryly.

The puncher borrowed a cigarette from Dick, sat down and commenced to talk. He asked Dick how long he'd been around.

"Several days," Dick answered.

"You sure you ain't seen that man Wolfe?" he asked again right sharp.

"Nope—don't know the man. What you want him for?" Dick asked.

"Well, boy, I found out that back in the early days up in Canada on the Belly River, my brother, Jack Lynch—by the way did you ever hear of him?"

Dick shook his head.

"Well, anyway, he was camped up there trapping. Had his wife and baby with him. He had some dealin' with this old Wolfe—Ben Snyder is his real name. In fact, Wolfe hung around his camp for a month or so. One day he pretended to leave and that evening about sundown he come back in the timber along the river and howled a time or two like a wolf.

My brother grabbed his rifle and walked up the river a ways, expectin' to find a wolf. Old Snyder stepped from behind a tree and shot him, then throwed him in the river. He just naturally went back then, took charge of my brother's wife and outfit. I've been huntin' him ever since.

"Him and another feller crossed the St. Mary's river day before yesterday, driving a bunch of horses. I reckon they'd blow in here. I don't know what become of my brother's wife, but I did hear that Snyder raised the kid, that was about two years old then. Some say it's a girl and some say it's a boy. I'm settlin' with that old man on sight, trustin' to luck I can find the kid!"

Dick wanted to tell what he knew, but something held him silent.

"Don't blame you," was all he said and he wandered back into the stable, wondering what would happen when the two men met. He wanted to see it. It would be a good play! Dick brushed Gray Boy down a bit to kill time. He stepped out in the alley behind the horses to put away his brush and stood watching the livery man. He and the stranger Lynch were looking off and pointing at something across the prairie.

Dick sauntered over and took a look. Two riders were coming in from the west. As they drew closer the livery man stepped back inside the door. Lynch sat down, with his hat pulled over his face, on a bench just outside. He shifted

his gun around in his belt. The two were talking as they rode up.

Dick stepped out, he wanted to be in the open. With a jerk he stopped—Slim Anderson was the younger man. Nobody could mistake the other. All he lacked of being a gray wolf was the hide. The Wolfe stepped off his horse with a grunt. Slim landed beside him. Lynch raised himself from his bench, pushed back his hat and hollered:

"Wolfe, I'm Jack Lynch's brother. I got you covered!"

He whipped his gun and shot. The Wolfe ducked and returned the fire. It was all done in the flash of a second. Lynch's gun dropped. His knees buckled and the Wolfe shot again as Lynch sprawled out face down on the ground. The Wolfe stepped sideways, glancing in every direction. Slim tilted ahead a little, took one step forward, then reeled and fell in a half-turn. Lynch's bullet had missed the Wolfe and caught him!

The livery man ran out. Wolfe covered him with his gun. His long arms shot up and stayed there till Wolfe was satisfied he was peaceable. The report of the shooting spread. In a few minutes the scene was thick with men examining the bodies. A deputy sheriff was clearing them back, to grab the facts of the case. Dick walked into the crowd. The old livery man told the story. He said the two riders came up peaceably and Lynch, the dead man, opened fire on them. He killed the one before Wolfe could get him. Wolfe nodded his head.

"That's how it happened!" he growled.

THE dead men were soon taken away and Wolfe turned the horses over to the livery man. Dick sat on the bench watching. He was a wolf all right! His name fitted him. His forehead sloped back into a mat of snarled gray hair. It gave him the look of a brute more than a man. He was narrow as a snake between his yellow, beady eyes. There was a set to his heavy jowls that made his lower teeth protrude. His words rolled out like thick growls. Dick saw the yellow eyes fasten on him. Snyder strolled over.

"Got a cigarette, boy? Quite a bit of fun we're havin' round here. You a stranger? Where you from?"

"Missouri," Dick said. He believed in Missouri a lot by this time.

Old Wolfe threw back his head and roared.

"Long rifle, boy, eh? One of them possum eaters? Don't reckon you'll be gettin' possum off these prairies. You'll have to go back home fer a Christmas feed."

"No, I won't," Dick answered. "I just blowed in, lookin' for work."

"Well, now, that's not too bad. I might use you myself." The old Wolfe stood scratching his stubbly beard in a ponder. "What can you do that's worth payin' fer, boy?"

"I'm a bronc fighter."

"I'll be damned! Every young squirt that rolls into this country thinks he's a bronc fighter—but we'll take that out of you. If ye're lookin' fer a job, I'll put you on. You got to be ready to fight and know how to take care of yourself. You seen what happened to my other man? No excuse for him lettin' himself git plugged!"

He jammed his hands down his belt and spit.

"I'll give you thirty bucks a month if you can do the work. I got a lot of bad horses."

An hour later Dick in the middle of Gray Boy was leading Anderson's horse out of town. Down country a few miles, they ran into a bunch of horses feeding along, about twenty head.

"This is our bunch, boy. We'll take them to the ranch. Think you can ride 'em?"

"They don't look bad to me," Dick answered. "Where did you get 'em?"

Dick knew the question was out of season but he wanted to hear what the explosion would sound like. Wolfe slapped his hand on his saddle horn and faced Dick.

"Young feller, you remember that I run this outfit! Nobody asks any questions. If you work fer me you do the work. I'll do the talkin' and pay the bills."

"All right," Dick answered. "That's the way she stands from now on."

"Right, boy. There's a lot of things you southern cowpunchers has got to learn. The biggest one is—keep yer mouth shut!"

Dick hazed the horses for a long way. If he was throwing his lot, it might just as well be with the toughest old bear in the country. He didn't care! It was something to be on the stamping ground of Slim Anderson and to pick

up his trail. Dick didn't like the idea of its running back into the Rocking H.

It was late at night when they reached the Wolfe's shack which Dick had quit several days before. The girl, Pat, gave Dick one sharp look, then went about her work. It was plain that introductions were out of Wolfe's way of living. People were only in his life for him to use and forget. Wolfe slammed his hat on the deer horns and told Dick to make himself at home.

"What's your name, boy?" he asked.

Dick was puzzled for a minute. The girl knew his name. The Wolfe threw back his massive head and laughed again in his loud, fiendish way.

"Ain't got one, eh? That's all the better. We'll give you one."

Dick whirled on him.

"No you don't! I'm furnishin' my own names. Buck Turner is my name. Call me Buck!"

DICK felt the girl's eyes burning him, but Buck it was from then on out.

"How come you're from Missouri and ain't got the southern drawl? Your stories don't hang together any too good."

"I thought it was work you wanted," Dick answered, "not a man's history. Jest consider that as none of your business!"

Wolfe roared again and slapped his thigh. He liked spunk. They finished their supper. He brought Dick a roll of bedding. Dick flipped it out on the floor along side the sapling bed he'd spent the week in. Dick chuckled to himself and wondered if any of the cuss words he'd planted in it would keep the old wizard awake. How he'd take to Buck Turner if he knew he'd been sleeping in his bed a week! But it was all right. Buck Turner had never slept in his bed. The thought of Buck Turner gave Dick a right good night's sleep.

Dick had been working a month or more before he got his real jolt. He discovered that the horses branded with the Circle H were work-overs of the Rocking H brand. The rockers had been brought in a circle over the H. From then on Dick worked with a savage purpose—as crude as the Wolfe's. He grew in speed and decisions in everything he did. He had hit a ruthless school and he was going through with the bitterness and drive of revenge.

Anything that struck Hank Hyde set Dick on the warpath. Dick imagined that the girl saw the change. He would catch her watching him with a new fear set on her face. She knew he was playing a game, but she dared not call it.

In the fall the blue haze rose off the Montana prairies. The first frost cleared the air and the high peaks of the Rockies stood in the distance. The prairie became yellowish brown with the dry grass. Horses fed peaceably across the range, and laid on fat against the bitter cold of winter.

Most of Dick's horses were well broken—he spent his time reining and training them to the throw and twist of the lariat rope. Old Wolfe was proud of Dick's work, for well-broken horses got bigger money. The Wolfe in his way had grown fond of Dick. He spent hours talking to him and gave small favors to hold him on the job. But Pat went on in her same way. The daily work often threw them together, but their conversation was strictly business and work.

One morning early Dick saw a great bank of rolling black in the south. It looked like storm clouds, but he knew that fall clouds should be lighter and more in layers. This was a rolling, rising heap of blackness. He watched it. It was traveling towards him. He yelled, "Prairie fire!"

The Wolfe and Pat rushed to the door. Wolfe recognized it instantly and cursed, as he shoved his rough big fingers through his matted gray hair.

Dick mounted his night horse and galloped off to bring in the saddle horses. Wolfe was out and turned them into the corral and slammed up the bars as Dick rode in. He roped a horse for the Wolfe, and caught his own Gray Boy for himself.

Pat jumped on the corral fence and hollered, "Ketch me a horse!"

"Ketch it yourself," old Wolfe yelled. He gave her a slap, and knocked her off the fence.

"There's nobody round here waitin' on you. We've got to go fight fire. You stay here! We'll throw the horses back in the pasture, Dick, and if the fire gits too close, Pat can let 'em out and run 'em north of the fire. If the fire crosses this

range, everything will starve to death this winter."

Dick looked towards the fire. The black smoke was still rolling up. Wolfe jerked down the bars and mounted his horse. As the herd ran out Dick went with them.

Wolfe roped a saddle horse and with two half hitches over a post, with his lasso rope tied the horse for Pat. Dick noticed that Pat was still lying where the Wolfe had knocked her from the fence. She hadn't moved. Dick jumped off his horse and raised her to a sitting position. Her eyes were blurred and watery. The Wolfe rode off, hazing the horses. When he saw Dick had stopped, he yelled:

"Leave that damn girl alone! She'll come to. We've got to head that fire before it gets here."

The horse left for Pat was rearing and pulling on his rope. It was a big bay horse and Dick saw it was one of the stolen Rocking H horses that now wore the worked-over Circle H brand. He was an old saddle-horse, with a big white saddle mark on each side of his withers. Dick yelled to the girl:

"Crawl on that horse and head north where you can rest and get out of the fire if it comes!"

The Wolfe was yelling and waving his hat for Dick to come on, as he hazed the horses towards the pasture. Dick soon caught up with him and shut the pasture gate behind the herd. He and Wolfe rode across the prairie in a high run towards the fire, a distance of five miles straight south. They saw the men on the west side of the fire fighting the edges to run it into a point. They turned west and rode hard to miss the front of the flame. A herd of frightened cattle ran past them. Wolfe jerked his gun and shot a big steer.

DICK knew the fire-fighting game. Without a word, they soon had the hide skinned from the legs of the steer and the split belly. Each one of them fastened a rope to the hind legs of the hide; then they mounted their horses. The other end of the rope was tied fast to the saddle horn. They gave the rope slack, then with a quick, hard run they hit the end of the rope, and jerked the hide back towards the steer's head. It cracked and ripped as it peeled off. Dick jumped from his horse and cut the hide loose at the neck, mounted again, and they were gone to the edge of the fire.

They held back from the blaze and fought the edge, to keep the fire from widening out, with their hide still between them. They straddled the narrow flames just as another rider, coming from the west, dismounted, and jumped onto the hide. He grabbed the tail of the hide to keep from falling off, while they dragged it back and forth, whipping out the edge of the grass fire.

Farmers and ranchers came across the prairies on a high run with wagons loaded with barrels of water and wet gunny sacks. The flames hissed and crackled as they licked up in the air. Others came with plows to plow fire guards and turn back the flames.

Often strong odors of burning flesh and hair from a horse or cow, or badger that had been caught by the fire, filled their nostrils. Other stock half burnt sent up pitiful squeals and bawls as they staggered around in the blinding smoke. Every man was tense, his nerves strung to the highest pitch as he battled the flames—some to save their homes and families, while others, like Dick, fought for the free Montana grass that fed the stock they loved.

As the sun climbed up, the south wind stopped for a minute. The black, thick smoke rising from the prairie grass went straight up. Then the scene changed. The men were at the mercy of the flames. Dick's horse coughed, choked and fell; he felt the jerk as Wolfe's horse hit the other rope. The fire shot up between them, and the rope burnt in two. He lay there for a few seconds; then his horse struggled to his feet, as a hard puff of wind struck them.

He jumped on Gray Boy—no longer gray for his hair was scorched brown—turned and ran down to the east side of the fire. But the wind was hard and traveled fast. He headed for the ranch to turn the horses out of the pasture. The Wolfe was following close behind him. He heard him shout:

"Go for the ranch and turn out the horses!" But Dick didn't need any telling! He was headed that way.

Gray Boy's stride was long and fast, as he ran neck and neck with the fire. Soon he passed it and was out in the

lead. Wolfe was right behind Dick, gaining on him.

Suddenly Wolfe's horse stepped in a badger hole and Dick saw him turn end for end in the air, then roll over on the ground. A second later Wolfe dragged himself to his feet, but his horse did not move.

As Dick came close, old Wolfe waved his hand and yelled: "Give me that horse!"

Dick made straight towards Wolfe, missing him by a couple of feet. Wolfe grabbed at his bridle reins. Dick held to the horn, swung half round in his stirrup and kicked with the back of his foot, just in time to knock the Wolfe over. He swung again into his saddle and looked back in time to see Wolfe rise to a sitting position and pull his gun. He emptied it at Dick, but every bullet missed—then he tried to run.

The fire was close to him and gaining fast. He fell to his knees and tried to crawl. Dick watching, saw old Wolfe struggle to his feet as the fire hit him, then he fell again. The flames leaped high in the air and licked back, lighting the grass for yards ahead of the main fire. Dick grinned. It was no hotter than old Wolfe deserved!

Gray Boy had caught his second wind in the clear air and was running easy. Dick made straight for the pasture. When he came to the fence he lifted lightly on his bridle reins, spoke to Gray Boy and spurred him. The gray sprang from the ground and cleared the fence like a deer. He hit running on the other side.

The horses in the pasture were coming up from everywhere and running to the north, forming a bunch as they went. Dick followed them whooping and yelling. He was holding his own with the fire. He coiled up his rope that had been dragging, tied a new hondo and shook out a loop.

The horses jammed and stopped against the north pasture fence. He rode into them, roped a fresh horse. Without stopping to change saddle he threw a loop on the fresh horse's nose, jumped on him and commenced rounding up the bunch.

As he passed the corral he saw that Pat had left on the Rocking H horse. The Wolfe's den would soon be nothing but ashes!

Gray Boy was keeping up to the bunch. Dick turned the horses down a trail that led straight north for several miles and came out in Milk River. The river was the boundary line at that place. After Dick crowded the horses across it, he saw fresh horse tracks, and the bank was wet where water had dripped off the horse. He was sure it was Pat. She had crossed a short while before he did.

When the sun was noon-high Dick had put Montana fifteen miles behind him and his two hundred head of horses. He ran them to a low place, unsaddled Gray Boy—caught a fresh mount and turned loose his bare-backed horse. Dick's legs were sore and stiff. It had been a hot chase; and while his horses fed Dick lay on the ground, trying to figure out what would be next.

He left his horses and rode to the top of a high knoll. He could see for miles around. Way to the north of him a tiny black spot moved slowly across the prairie in a straight line. It was a rider, maybe—Pat!

Hundreds of horses and cattle dotted the prairie, but they were standing still, none of them moved in the heat of the day. Soon the black speck topped a ridge and went on north out of sight. Dick was glad Pat got out of the Wolfe's den now laid under a heavy blanket of smoke. Only the top of the Sweet Grass Buttes showed above it . . . . Montana looked as black to Dick as his memories held it.

CHAPTER XIII

Rustlers' Brand

HANK HYDE'S old dog sitting in front of the Rocking H house, sent up a couple of ancient barks towards the south. Hank rose from his chair on the porch and shaded his eyes with his hands. A cowboy, riding straight in his saddle and waving his hat, hazed a bunch of unquestionable horses into the big corral of the Rocking H.

Hyde was cheerful and a smile spread all over his face, as he shook hands with Dick at the corral and welcomed him home. Dick dropped his head till the brim of his big hat covered his eyes. Hyde stilled gripped his hand.

"Boy, it's many days I bin waitin' for you to dot the skyline over there—sure glad to see you! What's this bunch of

horses you got? They look like my stock, got the same action and build. Where'd you get 'em?"

Dick smiled. That proved they were stolen Rocking H horses. They went into the corral to look them over. Hyde swore when he saw the Circle H brand on most of them. He turned to Dick.

"Where'd you get these horses, and who worked my brand into a Circle H?"

"Well, I'm too hungry to tell you now. Hank. I've only had a couple of meals in the last four days. I only slept when them horses did and they've been hell driving alone."

Hank looked closely at the boy. His young face showed hard treatment, his eyes were sunk and red. Hyde hooked his big arm around Dick's waist, and the two walked in silence to the ranch house. He wanted to talk to Dick alone first. The good-will giant of the prairies was hurt to think another man would steal his horses.

While Dick ate he uncoiled the whole story of his trip, not missing a word or an answer. How his horses were stolen at the Two Bar K ranch—how Gray Boy had taken him to Montana—his fight at the Turkey Track ranch, and how he saw Slim Anderson killed at Sweet Grass—the Wolfe's den—and the prairie fire. But he never mentioned Pat.

After he finished, Hank Hyde slid back off the edge of his chair, and lit a cigarette. Many minutes passed before he turned to Dick and said:

"Well, boy, it looks like Red Coon was in on this. Slim Anderson and him was always good pals. You say Slim and the Wolfe was together. My horses in Montana with the Wolfe's brand on 'em! Looks like we'd find a circle of horse thieves."

Dick was surprised at the sureness of Hank Hyde—a man known as he was for fair play—to implicate Red Coon, his foreman.

Hyde gripped the arms of his chair and beads of sweat stood out on his high forehead. His eyes half closed and an ugly line Dick had never seen before crossed his cheeks. His hair bristled as he rose and walked the floor.

"Boy, I believe you're tellin' the truth. Don't say a word to anyone, especially Coon. I'll watch him. We'll inspect every brand in the bunch you brought."

They walked out to the porch, where little Ann and Mrs. Hyde met Dick with a warm welcome. Mrs. Hyde smiled and said:

"The same old bashful Dick. Don't you ever git used to women folks?"

Dick grunted and blushed. Out in the corral Hyde stopped and put his hand on Dick's shoulder.

"Talkin' about women makes me kinda put things together. It don't look to me you're scairt of them all!"

Dick's face was as blank as a muskrat's. Hyde laughed.

"You're not puttin' this one over on me, son. I know it's all right. You wouldn't do anything wrong on the Rocking H . . . . There was a young girl walked in here after dark the other night, carryin' her saddle. She said she was going to Medicine Hat, but her horse fell in a badger hole back about ten miles and broke his neck. She'd had to walk. Mrs. Hyde's bin takin' care of her. She's sick and ain't left the bed since she come."

Dick's face changed in spite of all he could do, while his good old friend stared at him, smiling.

"But I noticed, boy, when I picked up her saddle to hang it up, her saddle blanket was still a bit warm and wet. Any blanket ought to cool off in ten miles' walking. When I went out the next mornin' there was a big bay Circle H horse, covered with dry sweat and saddle marks, standin' at the gate. I thought it was jest a stray driftin' through. You can't make me believe but what the girl rode that horse and turned him loose outside. Come on, Dick, now 'fess up to your old dad you know somethin' about that girl. She's connected with these Circle H horses."

Dick dropped his head, silent. He wouldn't lie. Hyde knew he didn't care to tell and passed it off. With a heavy whack on Dick's shoulder he said:

"That's all right, son. I can keep a secret."

ABOUT an hour later the corral was full of action. Hyde and four of his men helped Dick work his bunch of horses. Coon rode up and climbed to the fence.

They cut out all the Circle H horses—about a hundred and fifty head. The

rest of the bunch that wore different brands were turned back on the prairie where a rider gave them a shove towards the south. Hyde closed the gate and rubbed his hands as if he was wiping them from some dirty job.

The Rocking H boys helped Dick throw the horses down one at a time with their branded side up. Hyde clipped the hair off the brand and ruffled the branded spot up with a wet rag. He backed off, shifting from one side to the other, letting the sun play on the brand.

As it happened the first brand had been a bad job; and when he stood with the reflection of the sun on the wet brand at right angles, he could see nothing but the Rocking H. When he looked from another position, nothing but the circle, the new part that connected the top of the rockers over the H showed up.

He hollered at Coon on the fence:

"What's the matter with you, Coon? Are you too tired to come down and help me read this brand?"

"What brand?" Coon answered.

"Well come and see what you'd make out of it!" Hyde said.

Coon shifted back and forth the same as Hyde did, and after a long study he raised up, jammed his chin in the palm of his right hand and answered in a disgusted tone:

"There's nothin' but the Circle H on that horse!"

Hyde knew Coon could read better than that, but that was all he wanted; and after every horse in the bunch had been treated the same way, Hyde told the boys to throw them in the big pasture. He called Coon to the house with him.

Dick slept well that night in his own bunk. It was after breakfast the next morning that Coon lashed his bed and all his belongings on a pack-horse, mounted another horse and rode away. Dick waved good-by, but old Coon turned and shook his fist at Dick.

"You'll pay fer this!" he hollered back.

As the Rocking H boys watched him ride over the ridge out of sight, not a man felt as though they had lost anything. There was a cheerful feeling, and a smile passed over the bunch when Hank Hyde told them they'd be taking orders from the new foreman, Tack Hudson, from then on!

The boys left the ranch on their daily rise, while Dick sat on the corral fence looking off at the south. He seemed to be part of the Rocking H, and he was powerful glad to be back. He saw the same old Sweet Grass Buttes in the distance. They seemed to him thousands of miles away, till his mind drifted back to the foot of them, in the old Wolfe's den.

He knew that old Wolfe had taken up a piece of ground with a tombstone on it. That left Pat alone, as he was when he first saw the Rocking H. The girl bothered Dick. All forenoon he sat on the fence expecting Pat to come out. It wasn't till old Hyde sauntered from the house with his stiffened cowboy walk, and stopped by Dick that the latter looked up.

"Say, son, do you think I'm payin' you for settin' on fences?"

"Well, you ain't tried me yet!" Dick answered.

Hyde laughed. "Say, you young buzzard, you've been drawin' pay from this outfit all the while you were gone. You ain't hazin' Rocking H horses for your health, as long as I know it."

"Have it your way—you're the boss. Which way do I make my next circle?"

"I'm afraid this is goin' to be a long one, my boy. I'm shippin' this bunch of horses north into Saskatchewan, and I'm thinkin' you'd better go with 'em."

"Fine!" Dick sprang from the corral fence. "When do we start?"

"Tomorrow," Hyde answered. "They're all good horses and you see I can't afford to turn 'em back on the range. Besides it would cause a lot of talk and arguments. Some of the old snoops would want to know where I got 'em, and how come they had a Circle H on 'em? It's a cinch some of them horses has taken up with the south country and they'd be bound to go back leading the others with 'em."

At supper that night Pat Snyder sat across the table from Dick. Hyde noticed that they acted as though they had never met, but Dick kept stealing side glances at her. She looked so different. Her hair was nicely combed and she wore a dress. Her face was pale and gaunt. She held her eyes low, and had nothing to say. When the tiredness of the day was over, Dick was still thinking about her as he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XIV

Shadow of the Noose

IT was Hank Hyde that drove the chuck wagon the next day. Three other men and Dick drove the horses to the loading corral on the railroad at Medicine Hat. Hank Hyde had made all arrangements, signed the shipping contracts for Dick, and dropped a letter to Cliff Broom, a horse buyer—an old friend of his in Cudsworth, Saskatchewan, north of Prince Albert.

The next morning Dick met Mr. Broom. The word had gone out that there were horses for sale in town, and the town was lined with men eager to buy. They needed horses for farming. Broom told him that it was all arranged and an auction would start at ten o'clock.

Cliff Broom sent a telegram to Hank Hyde telling of the sale's success and asked him to ship more horses. Hyde answered, telling Dick to stay and receive the next bunch, which would arrive in less than thirty days. Dick swore when he thought of staying in that town without a thing to do, where few people talked his language.

Days wore off like thousands of years till the next bunch of horses snorted and ran out of the cars into the corral. Dick wanted to hug them. Night after night he had rolled over and over in his bed, thinking of the prairies. Someone to talk to, even Pat, little as she talked, would have been heaven alongside of this unknown gibber!

One day Mr. Broom handed Dick a letter. Dick took it and went on. He looked at it and felt embarrassed; he couldn't even read his own name. It was a week before he got nerve enough to take it back to Mr. Broom and ask him to read it. Broom patted Dick on the shoulder saying:

"Boy, there're a heap of people in this country can't read."

The letter read:

My dear son Dick:

I am writing to tell you things are going fine on the ranch. We ain't missed Red Coon at all. I appreciate the way you are handling my stock. Cliff Broom will give you any expense money you might need. Looks like you would have to stay all winter, for I intend to ship horses there as long as there is a sale.

Mrs. Hyde has gone east to put Ann in school. Pat has turned out to be a real girl and a great help to Mrs. Hyde. We thought it best Pat had some education and she will keep Ann from getting too lonesome in the east. Mrs. Hyde will return in the spring. If you need anything, let me know.

I remain your old friend,

Hank Hyde.

Broom finished the letter and threw it on the desk. He noticed Dick's hat was pulled down over his eyes and his face was red. Broom's sense of humor was raised a little.

"There's nothing wrong in that letter to make a feller blush!"

Broom chuckled as he scratched his head.

"Which one of them is your girl, Ann or Pat?"

"Neither one!" snapped Dick. Broom's sides shook with laughter as Dick stamped out.

In the year that passed Dick sold four bunches of horses. He had had several letters from Hyde, and just that many times Cliff Broom had the pleasure of asking him which girl was his, and seeing Dick stamp out of his office without an answer.

Dick almost believed one of them was his girl, for each time he felt nervous and his face turned hot. But he hadn't time to think of that. Dick was all horse! Often the French waitresses grabbed their noses with their fingers and tried to whinny at him like a horse. It embarrassed him so much he moved his eating place downtown, where an old Chinaman ran an unswept restaurant.

ONE morning Dick rolled from his bunk and stamped his boots on the floor to warm his feet and start circulation. He hitched his shoulders, and held first one hand and then the other to warm his ears. As he reached the barn where he kept his horses, he found the door open, and in a quick glance saw that his saddle, and one of his saddle horses were gone. He threw a bridle on the other one, mounted him bareback and took the tracks of the missing horse. They were plain and fresh. He followed them for a mile or two and then off in the timber.

The top crust on the ground was frozen a quarter of an inch deep, but the weight of the horse broke through it. Dick found

the tracks again as they circled to the north. A mile away he saw a rider on a gray horse, and took after him as fast as his horse could run. He was within two hundred yards of him before the rider looked back and saw Dick coming. Away he went as fast as he could ride.

Dick loosened his rope and made a loop in it. He meant to rope the cuss, but he looked up as he heard a shot. A bullet whizzed past him. They kept whistling until six had passed!

Dick was expecting to stop one of them, but the rider was a poor shot from a running horse! Dick crowded him as they made between two patches of timber. He was gaining fast, when a barbed wire fence loomed up in front. There was no way for the fellow to escape. The under-brush on the sides was too thick to ride through. He was whipping his horse. Dick knew he intended to jump the fence, but the mud was too slick.

When the horse rose to jump, his hind feet slipped back. He hit the top wire with his front feet and fell. Dick was getting close. He saw the man scramble to his feet, pick up something black and start to run. Dick pulled his thirty-eight from under his shirt and fired.

The man dropped the black bag he was carrying and ran into the timber. Dick reached the fence, jumped off and followed him to the edge of the wood. Another bullet clipped the limb of a tree close to Dick's head—that was invitation enough to turn him back!

Dick picked up the black bag; it was heavy. After he freed his horse from the fence he opened the bag. It was full of money—Canadian bank notes and gold. He rubbed his eyes as if he were seeing things, turned some of it over and felt of it. He mounted his horse in a hurry, leading the other horse. Carrying the bag in front of him, he wondered what he would do with the money. He'd take it back to town and see whose it was.

He knew no one would carry that much money through the country and steal a horse! The closer he got to town the more excited he got. Finally, for no reason at all except that he didn't want to mix up in anything, he decided to say nothing about it. As he passed a big thick bunch of brush he threw the bag into it —money and all—and rode on without stopping.

The sun was just coming up as he hit the main street. He saw men and women hurrying here and there. A big bunch was crowding to get in the door of the bank. Dick wondered why all the excitement, but he rode on and put his horses away.

On his way to the Chinaman's for breakfast the town marshal stopped him.

"Hey, where you bin so early in the morning?" he bawled out. It made Dick a bit mad to have somebody questioning him in such a surly manner.

He turned and faced the officer, saying, "Somebody stole one of my horses."

The officer yelled, "You mean you robbed the bank. I seen you comin' to town with two horses. Where'd you take your partner to?"

"Partner hell, I ain't got any!" Dick hollered back.

"That will do, young man—stick 'em up!" The officer jabbed the gun in his belly. Dick put his hands up while the officer felt him for his gun. He found it and pulled it out from beneath Dick's shirt. He smelled it.

"That gun's bin shot in the last couple of hours. It still stinks of powder smoke —git along there, young feller."

He marched Dick up to the town barracks and locked him up in a small iron cell. It took up one corner of the big room that was used for a city hall. There were a few chairs scattered about, a long bench against each wall. A big desk littered with papers stood in another corner surrounded with scores of cigar butts and spittoons.

Snowshoes, old rifles and parts of Mounted Police uniforms hung on the walls.

The officer tried to show his authority. Dick could tell that he was the first guy the old fellow had ever nabbed! Dick burst out laughing.

"What's the matter with you, young feller?" snorted the marshal.

"I'm a thinking you'd better open the door so you can throw out your chest. After the brave stunt you pulled off, the town won't be able to hold you."

Dick's humor rasped the old man the wrong way.

"Young feller, you won't feel so cocky when the law gits through with you for shootin' the bank cashier last night."

Things didn't look so funny to Dick now. Every time he tried to explain the marshal cut him off.

IT was night before Cliff Broom connected Dick up with the bank robbery. He came over to see him. That cheered Dick up a bit. He asked him to tell him the whole story, but Dick just shook his head and said he didn't do it. Broom had never heard of his lying or being dishonest. The coolness of the boy's actions made Broom believe he was innocent.

That night Broom wired Hank Hyde, telling him what had happened and to come up at once.

The Canadian law read that any man committing murder or highway robbery could receive no bail. And any man that was hauled up before the law is guilty till he proves himself innocent—so that held Dick thirty days in jail awaiting trial.

The lack of fresh air and exercise made Dick pale. His eyes were sunken in their sockets and his cheeks hollowed. The old Chinaman brought his meals, but Dick's appetite failed and his beefsteak went back half eaten. The old officer said Dick deserved what he was getting, and wouldn't even allow him tobacco. But every time he looked, Dick was laughing.

The day before the trial Hank Hyde arrived. He met Dick like a father. He told the city marshal what he thought of him for holding a young boy under such confinement.

The case was above the hands of the police magistrate. They sent for a judge and tried the case where the crime was committed in order to use the bank cashier for a witness. He was mending up fast and was able to move about a bit.

The morning court opened, the house was packed. They crowded the door and stood on the porch. Hyde sat close to Dick and the attorney he had brought with him, the best criminal lawyer in southern Alberta.

The bank cashier was called to the witness stand. When asked if he saw the man that shot him, he said he did. He had a good look at him as he held a gun in his ribs and made him open the safe.

Then they asked if the prisoner was the man that robbed him. He looked at Dick for a long time. The court room pulsed with silence. Every one strained their ears, and Hank Hyde braced for the blow. He sat as straight and silent as a statue. Relief showed in his face and he smiled as the bank cashier slowly shook his head and answered:

"Nope, that's not him! The feller that robbed me was much taller, and all around bigger man. He was light complected, with a grizzly beard, and I noticed three fingers was gone off his left hand—the three middle ones, leaving only the thumb and the little finger."

Aw's! and ah's! went through the room.

The old Chink was brought up and questioned as to what time Dick had left his room. He said:

"His bed not ve'lly warm. He sleep not too good. He see boy leb'ee when jus' little bit light!"

The court ground on. Another old farmer came to Dick's aid. He swore "he seen and heard a rider pass his place on the edge of town, he couldn't see very well, but it was a full half hour before Dick passed."

Then Dick told his story, every bit of it—only he left out all parts pertaining to the black bag full of money. He figured he'd earned that much in the thirty days in jail!

The case was dismissed for lack of evidence against Dick. Cliff Broom and Hyde congratulated him as the crowd left. The town marshal stamped out. His feathers had dropped. He was not the hero of yesterday.

The town welcomed Dick's freedom with open doors. Hank Hyde went back south leaving Dick in charge, as if nothing had happened.

CHAPTER XV

Sidewinder's Warning

TWO more deep snows and hot summers fell on the north country before Hank Hyde wrote him to come home. He felt as though he had lost three years of his life, here among these slow-moving outfits. He imagined he already felt the prairie breeze blow against him, as he leaned ahead in his stirrups and rode on a keen trot through the outskirts of Cudsworth.

Dick rode to the spot where he had left the money taken from the bank robber. It was still there, under the bush. He slipped it into a gunny sack and

rode back into town. He stopped and talked to several different fellows, rode to the barn and put his horse away. He rolled the money up in his bed, tied it as he always had. After a long good-by with the old Chink, he threw his bed on his shoulder and walked to the depot. He slammed the bed down on the platform, bought his ticket and checked it to Medicine Hat.

The smoking car found Dick most of the time; there were ladies in the other coach and they still bothered him. Two days on the rattling train, and Dick rolled off in Medicine Hat. He stood around on the platform like a stranger, till he saw his bed wheeled into the depot.

Walking uptown to look about he found banners and flags hanging everywhere. Across the street hung a big white sign with red letters a foot long on it! The town was overflowing with cowpunchers. They wore their loudest clothes, and long lines of saddle horses standing to the hitch racks told Dick it was cowboy-day in Medicine Hat. The annual tournament was about to break loose.

None of the boys recognized him even though there were plenty of them there from the prairie country. Dick was no longer the lean wiry boy he was when he left. He had grown to full-size, a man of medium height and build. His thin boyish face had widened out, and a few straggly whiskers had taken root on his chin—but he still had the springy panther-like walk, swaying a bit like a Cree Indian.

In the restaurant everybody was betting on the contests to take place next day.

"Well, Red Coon will win the broncridin'—he's done it for the last ten years. There's not a man in the country can hold a candle to him!"

"I'm figgerin' Coon will be beat!" cried one of the punchers, mad at finding Coon the favorite.

"Rot!" a half dozen hollered at once. "You know there ain't a chance of beatin' Coon. He's the best rider in the whole county."

"Hold up jest a minute!" the mad puncher yelled. "If the Rocking H's Gopher Dick was here I'd bet my summer pile on him."

"Where is he?"

"Old Hyde's got him tucked away in the north country."

"The hell he has!" Dick jumped upon the middle of his table and commenced to clog dance. Dishes flew in every direction. The restaurant proprietor fanned himself out of the door, while the "gittin' out" was good. The boys yelled as they recognized Dick. Two of them lifted him on their shoulders and up the street they went, yelling and shooting. The whole town turned out to see what had happened.

Dick smiled. He thought Hyde must have something up his sleeve—he had timed the trip just right. They passed Red Coon leaning up against the building. Dick yelled "Howdy!" at him but Coon only shifted his chaw of tobacco and walked off, his hands jammed in his pockets. One of the boys yelled, "It don't look so easy fer yer now, does it?"

Ten minutes later in the hotel lobby Hank Hyde quieted them, and welcomed Dick to the contest. He was all smiles as he turned to the boys.

"I told you there was a surprise a-waitin'!" he announced.

The boys yelled until the manager cried for peace—Mrs. Hyde and Ann rushed out to see what the excitement was. Little Ann was quite a young lady now, and Mrs. Hyde was surprised that Dick looked at her once, while stuttering over his words, trying to say he was glad to be back.

Hyde dismissed the boys. Dick had better stay with him. He didn't want him so full of whisky that he couldn't ride the next day. The boys agreed and left.

Hyde and Dick talked over the horse business in the north. Dick asked about the prairies, and how things were going around the Rocking H. Hyde told him. There was quite a lot of horse stealing going on. More settlers had moved in on the range and parts of it were getting a little bad.

The settlers bothered the stock—dogged it off away from their homes to hold the feed for their own stock. They didn't stop eating another man's beef when their supplies were low in the winter. So many were trying to make a go of it that anything was a temptation.

Dick cursed and walked across the room. The thought of the big stock country dying out hurt him. Ann and Mrs. Hyde listened; they loved to hear Dick

talk. His lingo was his own. His voice was soft and his words plain, but he had changed little in disposition.

Ann watched him with curious eyes. The smooth way he moved his hands, and the speed with which he rolled a cigarette without spilling tobacco! She had always heard of Dick as a capable boy, full of action, with a keen sense of humor. She thought of him as she would a wild horse free on the range, head and eyes popping, ready to fight for freedom. More than that, he always rated as one of the family; even Dave Russell like him.

PAT was still missing at supper time. When Mrs. Hyde told them that she wasn't well and that they would have to eat without her, Hank gave Dick a sly look across the table. Dick was busy eating supper!

"Have you ever met Pat?" Mrs. Hyde inquired.

"Yes, I seen her once at the ranch, jest before I left."

"Oh, that's right," Mrs. Hyde said. "She was there before you come from the south . . . . well, you wouldn't know her. She is quite different now . . . . three years of school have made a big change in her life . . . . everybody's crazy about her . . . . she's had letters and presents from the East every day since she's been home."

Dick felt the same hot blur come over his face. Hyde socked his chin in the palm of his hand:

"Better have a drink of water, Dick!" he chuckled.

Mrs. Hyde looked up. "Why all the laughin'? What's the joke?"

"Oh, nothin', Mother, only Dick can't stand talk about girls."

Dick wanted to throw his fork at the old joker.

The contest started at ten o'clock. The grandstand was packed, hundreds of cowpunchers lined the fences and corrals. The judges were mounted on horses in the arena, while the hazers and pick-up men rode in ready to pick up the horses when they were through bucking and help the riders off.

The Hyde family had a box near the arena fence. Hank was asked to judge the tournament, but refused because he was betting on Dick. Dick milled around among the contest riders, while Coon sat by the corral fence with a few of the north country boys. He was whittling long shavings off a stick and chewing tobacco.

The steer riding came first. Steers were roped by the head and hind feet, and stretched out on the ground. The cowpuncher fastened on his circingle, mounted the steer and hollered, "Let 'em go!" The ropes were loosened and off they went, bucking, twisting, and bellowing across the arena, leaving a cloud of dust! Some rode them and some didn't!

Then came the bulldogging, where a man stakes his life between a split second and a pair of sharp horns, a broken neck or a trampling in the dirt. The cowboy took the punishment—not the animal.

A Spanish boy from Mexico led in the trick-roping, catching running horses by either foot or all four at once, or the tail. Spinning loops in front of them, behind them, over them and under them. Jumping in and out of fancy fast-spinning loops.

Then came the bronc-riding. The bronc was led to the middle of the arena, snubbed to a saddle horn of another horse and blindfolded. The saddle was put on and cinched. The rider mounted, taking a short hackamore rope in one hand. The cowboy snubbing the bronc jerked off the blindfolds, hit the horse and let go. He bucked off across the field. The rider fanned him with his hat—if he could, and dug him with his spurs to make him buck harder.

The hazers rode between the bucking horse and the fences, keeping him out in the clear. When the horse was through bucking—if the rider was still on—the pick-up man rode alongside, and the rider jumped from the bucking horse to the pick-up man's horse. The hazer caught the bucking horse and unsaddled him.

The riders were numbered and so were the bucking horses. The horses' numbers were put in a hat, shaken up and the rider drew one out. That was his horse for the day. Dick drew a big wall-eyed roan. When the snubbing man turned him loose, he went straight up. Dick spurred him on both sides and fanned him with his hat. The crowd yelled—more money was bet.

Dick had been lucky in drawing a good bucking horse. There were several other buckers—and then Coon's turn came. He drew a hell-windin' buckskin that did

a real job bucking with Coon sitting easy. There was more yelling in the grandstand, and more money changed hands.

That night the town was full of excitement waiting for the next day. Coon's side was still betting strong on him—and so was Dick's. The day's ride had been a draw. Cowboys fought all over town and officers were hard to find.

At three o'clock the next afternoon Dick climbed up onto his next bucking horse—a big lantern-jawed gray horse, with a hog back and the disposition of nine wildcats. When the snubbing boy jerked the blindfold off, the gray whirled, trotted stiff-legged to the middle of the arena, where he squealed, broke in two, and commenced to unwind. He went up, swapped ends in the air and lit going the other way, but Dick was cowboying him, fanning him with his hat and looking over his shoulder back at the grandstand.

Dick saw the pick-up man—a boy from the northeast—crowding him close. The gray went high and crooked and as he hit the ground the pick-up man was coming at full speed. He turned his horse quick, hitting the gray broadside with his chest. The jar knocked the gray horse down with Dick underneath, and the pick-up man's horse went over both of them. The crowd yelled. They could see it was done on purpose.

THE next thing Dick knew he was in the hotel and Mrs. Hyde was bathing his face. He wiggled his arms and legs and was glad to find they would still work. The whole side of his face was skinned.

Pat stayed and changed the pack on Dick's head while the others went to supper. She changed it several times. Dick wanted to say something, but he didn't dare. Finally he raised his hand and held it out.

"Hello, Pat!" he said. "Seems like our acquaintance only comes when I'm on the down and out." Pat took his hand and gave it a light shake.

"That's all right, Dick. I guess you would do the same for me. But would you please tell me how you got out of Montana with that bunch of horses? Where is my father? Did you kill him?"

She looked Dick straight in the eye. He met her gaze, but never spoke. He never thought of killing a man—but how could he tell her what happened?

"Come on, Dick, tell me. I don't care. I want to know—I am always afraid of meeting dad sometime. No one can tell what he might do to me!"

"Don't worry about that, Pat, the Wolfe won't bother you."

Then he told the story of the prairie fire. How Wolfe's horse had stepped in a badger hole, fallen and broken his neck; the way the Wolfe had tried to grab Gray Boy to ride to safety; and then had tried to shoot. Dick stopped, but Pat urged him to tell the rest.

"Well, the last I seen, the prairie fire caught the Wolfe . . . . I saw him fall as the flames hit . . . . it was going high and too hot for anybody to live . . . . I got the horses out of the pasture and ran the boundary line—luck always seems to play in my hand, but I just can't keep out of trouble."

They were silent for a long while. When Pat looked up Dick was watching. Her lips parted and she smiled, showing her white teeth.

"Thanks, Dick," she said. "I guess pop had it coming to him, but you won't tell anybody who I am?"

"No," Dick answered, "not even you."

Pat was wondering what he meant by that, when Mrs. Hyde returned. The cowboys had quit "whoopin'" it up in the streets. The town was quiet and they left Dick alone. He lay there for a few minutes, then rose and staggered out of bed. He was stiff and sore, and his right shoulder ached when he raised it—but he was determined to ride the next day.

He heard Hank say that Coon put up a good ride after Dick was hurt and he wondered if the judges would disqualify him for the day's ride. If they did, he had no chance at the finals. He walked out of the hotel quietly. He knew that if he lay there in bed he would be too stiff to ride the next day. He had to work the soreness off and keep it off. All night he walked and moved around the town.

The contest was in full swing, the boys were twirling their loops in the trick rope contest when Dick climbed the arena fence the next day. The crowd saw him and yelled. Red Coon was strutting himself, yelling at every good trick the ropers made. He was talking to the pick-up man that knocked Dick's horse over—they were enjoying the show till Coon looked

up and saw Dick, then the pick-up man looked.

Dick yelled: "Howdy, Coon!" but Coon dropped his head and cut a long shaving from the stick he was whittling. Dick knew the sign. When Coon was bothered he whittled big shavings, then slowly tapered them down to little ones if his plans were working out to suit him.

Dick walked around the corral fence and looked in—did anything to make believe he wasn't hurt. The side of his face was all one scab—but the judges wouldn't mind that! It was Hank Hyde's big hand that fell on Dick's shoulder and turned him round.

"Say, you young coyote, where you been? The whole family's been worried about you—the girls and Mrs. Hyde have looked everywhere. Think you're able to ride?"

"Sure!" answered Dick. "I've been movin' around to keep thataway. Mrs. Hyde's doct'rin's all right, but it will make a man stiff and sore."

"Well, I've found out how the judges feel—they've barred that pick-up man off the track. They said that gray horse was the hardest bucker here. You made a good ride and was doin' it easy when you fell."

DICK smiled. The old world looked bright again. A half hour later the bronc-riding started. Coon drew the gray that had fallen with Dick and was the first man out. As the snubbing boy pulled the blindfold off, the gray went into action. He reared and squealed. Coon leaned ahead in his saddle, and down he came hitting the ground with all fours. Off they went across the field, puffing in hard style, with his four feet and nose close together each time he hit the ground.

Coon was riding him straight up till he swapped ends in the air—hit the ground like a trip hammer and went up turning almost on his side in the air but catching his feet before he hit the ground, springing again with the other side up and hitting the ground back into action. He jumped back two straight jumps, then shot ahead like a torpedo.

Coon's head flipped as if it had cracked his neck, and the southeast boys yelled as they saw Coon grab the horn and pull himself back into the saddle. The gray stopped in his tracks in a sulk, with his head down. The pick-up man took Coon off. Coon slid to the ground. He reeled a little as he tried to walk and blood gushed from his nose and mouth.

Dick drew a black horse that had thrown his rider the day before. It pleased Dick. He knew his horse had to buck to equal the ride Coon had just put up. It was a good one!

The black was a man-eater. He fought everything that came close. A cowboy roped his front feet and threw him—five other men helped as they saddled him while he was down. Dick got in the saddle and they let him go. He went up—hit the ground, and bounced off like a rubber ball. Then he hit stiff-legged and stopped.

Dick fanned him with his hat—he made a high jump to the right, hit the ground—and then to the left. He lost his feet and came down on his side. Dick threw his leg out of the way to keep his horse from falling on it, but stayed with the saddle and came up with the black. The crowd yelled and rose to their feet as the black tried to mop up the rest of the arena.

Dick was sure enough riding for show. He spurred the black in both shoulders and back to the hip bones. He rode with ease and balance, and waved his hat at the grandstand. The black bucked up to the fence and stopped—Dick grabbed the top rail and swung off and the black ran around the ring. That was the last ride for the day.

The judges swore Dick and Coon had ridden so close together nobody could judge it. It was a draw, and they would have to ride it off the next day. The gray had fallen with Dick—and made Coon pull leather. The final match between Dick and Coon was set for ten o'clock the next morning. Dick was to ride the gray horse and Coon the black—held out as the two worst in the country.

The sun was a little off center on the morning side the next day when the grandstand filled with people. The cowboys rode into the arena on their horses and formed a solid line round the fence. The judges mounted and rode in. Dick and the gray came first. The gray was sore from the day before. His back was humped like a rainbow. He was blindfolded and three men held him. Dick walked up to his side, grabbed the saddle horn with one hand, and with the other

jerked off the blindfold. The gray quivered and Dick sprang into the saddle.

The gray squatted to the ground a little, and with one jump to the left he tore dirt with all four feet, then up he went. Sun-fished on his side—lit half balanced and up again. He came down and bolted straight ahead. Dick was riding free and easy as the gray bucked with high twisting jumps.

He pulled his one foot up on the horse's side, reached down and flipped his spur rowel with his hand—he was riding for points—then he reached around and spun the other spur with his hand. He jerked his feet out of the stirrups, threw both feet ahead and kicked the gray in the neck.

Hank Hyde tossed up his hat and yelled, while the prairie cowboys turned hand-springs and howled. The crowd were getting their money's worth. The gray horse did everything but turn hand-springs. Dick threw both hands above his head and looked back at the judges till the gray stopped. Dick slapped his hands on the front of his saddle and jumped off, landing on his feet ten feet ahead. The gray kicked at him and ran off.

All the prairie punchers surrounded Dick with whoops and yells till the judges cleared them back.

When Coon fought the black and turned him loose, the crowd saw real action for a few seconds. The black bucked crooked, then he made four jumps straight ahead and shot off to the left. He reared on his hind feet and jumped—Coon's head flopped a little as the black sideswiped to the left. Coon lost his seat and went up in the air. As he started down the black met him halfway and sent him rolling in the dirt.

The judges' decision was already made for them. Dick was the champion. Cowboys whipped him on the back with their hats. Hank Hyde looked twenty years younger. He was the proudest man in the whole of Alberta. The championship was going back to the Rocking H.

That night was the final wind-up. Hank Hyde bought whisky for the punchers going and coming. Dick sneaked away from the crowd, and pulled out to his room alone. Red Coon got drunk and lay dead to the world on the sidewalk till Hank Hyde stumbled on him. He picked Coon up and a couple of boys helped him put Coon to bed.

As the train pulled out next morning the Hyde women and Pat were on it, leaning out of the windows talking to Hank and Dick. As the train started Pat threw out a small package which Dick caught with one hand.

Hank stood with his hand on Dick's shoulder.

"Well, boy," he said, "ain't you goin' to open that? If it's somethin' to eat, I want half."

"Reckon you could have all of it for the askin'," said Dick, and then tore it open. It was a silver buckle—across the wide silver plate in the back was engraved, *"To Gopher Dick, champion at Medicine Hat bucking contest."* They were both silent as they walked towards town. Something was missing!

CHAPTER XVI

Gun Ordeal

DICK was glad to get back to the old ranch. It was the only place that had ever felt like home to him. He loved the big rambling place and the good will that hung over it; but as the days slipped by he felt that something was lost forever.

The prairie was no longer that vast stretch of country. He had to ride around farmers' fences on the range, dogs barked at him a mile away and he saw foreigners standing in front of their small lumber shacks watching him ride past. Often horses ran into the barbed wire fences and cut themselves until they had to be shot—or tag behind the big bunch the rest of their crippled lives.

In the spring Dick rode as Hank Hyde's top man, the flank-rider—one who rides on the outer flank of a man's range—going when and where he would, stopping at other ranches and bringing back stock that had strayed too far off from the range.

He took four saddlers and a pack horse with his bed—but his bed no longer held the big roll of money. He had buried it in a safe place on the prairie and waited for the time when he might need it.

The month of May brought increases to the stock world. Hundreds of young frisky colts ran circles, bucked and played about their mothers. Dick loved

to ride amongst this. It filled him with new life. Herds of white-faced calves stretched out in the sun or bucked and played across the prairie with their tails "a poppin' in the air"!

Mrs. Hyde had returned from the East alone, to be with Hank through the long summer work. The girls would not be out that year. When she handed Dick a big silk muffler Pat had sent to him, the punchers laughed and hooted.

Next morning action started on the place. Men hustled about at top speed. Old Dave Russell, the roundup cook, raved and cussed as he loaded his jugs of whisky in the chuck wagon. The Rocking H horse roundup pulled out at sunrise. The chuckwagon bounced across the badger holes, and Dave swayed in the high seat as he led off across the prairie.

On to the prairie swung the saddle cavvy and cowpunchers ready for hard work. The country was dryer than usual. There had been no rain since the snowfall. A dry, hot wind swept the prairie and heat waves rolled over the ridges. The blanket of green spring grass was turning yellow.

By late July waterholes dried up and the country was in a panic. Stock trailed for miles across the prairies to water. This told the boys the origin of the deep buffalo trails—the drought, years before, when millions of buffalos roamed the prairies, they had traveled long distances for water.

Dick and the other boys often found farmers' horses locked in pastures where the water had dried up. For love of the horses they cut the fences and drove them to the nearest water. Hank Hyde looked worried when the roundup drove in with its big herd of horses. After a talk with Tack Hudson and Dick, they turned them loose and let them scatter to find water.

But rain came in the fall; a steady blowing gale followed by a fine sprinkling rain that lasted for days. The whole country was sopped and slushy, the low places and lakes filled with water. Each day the mercury dropped lower until the sweeping blizzards came from the north and the prairies were locked again for a cold, hard winter.

By the first of February the hard winter had taken a countless toll from the prairie stock. The endless whiteness of the prairie, covered with drifted snow, made it look like a great crinkly washboard. The old ranchers sat in their houses, there was little they could do. The cattle were too weak to move, and snowdrifts too deep for teams to haul hay through.

Hyde's rheumatism set in from the cold and exposure and he was forced to sit in his big chair by the fire, looking out across the great white prairie. The smile left his face and the wrinkles, deepened. A dead look hung in his eyes as he ran his fingers through his long hair, and prayed for an early chinook wind from the southwest. It hurt Dick to see this strong old man dying with the prairies. Hank Hyde had spent thousands of dollars to protect his stock, but now he was helpless. His fate lay in the weather.

THE last February moon had changed as Dick chopped the ice from his bunkhouse door one morning to open it. As he stepped out a stinging north breeze swept across the country. The sun rose in streaks of yellow, a glittering sun-dog on each side. They sparkled like ice with all imaginable colors in them. When it was two hours above the horizon a streak like a rainbow circled the whole sky, and in the north, west, and south other sun-dogs about the size of the sun showed.

There was cheer around the Rocking H. Every man knew that sun-dogs meant a change in the weather. But the days stayed crispy and cold. A horse walking over the frozen snow could be heard for a hundred yards by the crunch and squeak of his feet.

One evening the sun set into a band of red and yellow marking the top of the heavy wind clouds that rolled up in the southwest and half hid the jagged peaks of the Canadian Rockies. After dark a hard puff of wind came. It rattled the doors and whistled down the stove pipe. In a few minutes, the heavy coat of ice thawed from the window panes and water ran down the walls. Hyde opened the door, stepped out. He felt the warm wind come, like a breath of new life.

There was action about the place next morning. The cowboys rolled out whooping and yelling. A late February chinook meant spring, and three or four weeks of warm weather before it stormed again. They rode around at their own leisure, watching the snow go from the ridges uncovering thousands of dead horse and

cattle carcasses scattered over the prairie. The water ran from the snow drifts into the low places.

Dick saw the big white country turn into a rolling brown, and poor weak cattle feed about slowly or stretch in the warm sun. Spring had broken early and the prairie life moved again!

After the roundup the boys worked the horses, branded the colts, and held the big herds through the breeding season. Dick broke broncos. He had taken Tack Hudson's place as foreman and rode from daylight till dark, fighting the cold and leaving the orders for the boys. Each year Hank Hyde was seen less and less, until four of them had passed. Ann and Pat stayed in the East, but Mrs. Hyde came back each summer to be with her husband.

Mrs. Hyde waited on Hank, and kept the books. Many a night she and Dick sat up late checking accounts. She loved Dick as if he had been her own boy, and spent hours teaching him the ways of the outside world. Dick had learned to like her and could talk without blushing and dropping his head.

His thoughts turned more often to the girl he had found at the Wolfe's den back under the Sweet Grass Buttes. The story as it came back to him of her conquests in the East filled him with a strange foreboding of the distance which was growing between them. Yet the messages which came back from her were more welcome for their kindliness.

Things were going wrong, the Rocking H was land poor and taxes and upkeep gnawed into the income. Heavy doctor's bills for Hank Hyde, who refused to leave the prairie and go to civilization, were worrying Dick. Often he wanted to go out on the prairie and dig up his own money to pay the bills, but he couldn't do that. They would connect the story and know where it came from.

WHEN the geese honked overhead again, following their leader's straight flight to the north, and puppy coyotes played around their dens, or sat up and cocked their heads to one side, watching with curious eyes a horse or cow meandering lazily across the prairie, the Rocking H ranch lost more than money or stock!

A short way from the ranch—out in the big horse pasture on a small knoll towards the morning sun—Hank Hyde was laid to rest on the prairie he loved. . . . . He had died with the range!

They missed the smile on his wind-tan face, with a cheer and good will for every one. When the sun dropped red into the west, the Rocking H cowboys sat quiet on their bunks, while Dick stood on the porch of the big ranch house and looked far off into the distance.

For days he didn't speak. Each morning he saddled his horse and rode off, to return just before sundown, his face serious and gaunt. He was wondering what Mrs. Hyde and the girls would do and how they would live. They depended on him for everything and responsibility changed him from a carefree boy to a hard thinking man. The girls had returned home when Hank Hyde died. They cheered Dick as much as they could and they had many rides across the prairies. Dick could talk easily to Pat now and he told her of his fears for the ranch. But Mrs. Hyde grieved without stopping. The Rocking H held her love no longer. Things about the place brought memories that hurt. Dick and the girls decided she must leave. A few days later found Dick alone on the station platform, waving his hat good-by to the girls, until a cloud of black smoke from the engine rolled back over the train.

Another year had moved behind Dick and the Rocking H since Hank Hyde passed away. The loss through the winter had been light, and things were running well; but letters from Mrs. Hyde in the East told him her health was failing fast. Hospital bills, and doctors had piled a mortgage on the Rocking H, and even the interest was hard to get.

Each time horses were sold or beef was shipped, he had the dumb old cook help him notify them by mail. He dictated the letters while the cook, spread out over half the table, scribbled the words in letters so big they could feel them. After each performance was over the cook wiped the sweat from his forehead with his arm, and cussed Dick for using words with three syllables. The cook boasted of having two years of school and once he almost got a job counting hogs in the Chicago Stockyard.

When Dick received a letter from Mrs. Hyde the cook would always take it, slip into his bedroom as if he was going for his glasses, and read the letter over sev-

eral times, sweating blood till he learned it by heart, then he would walk out strutting like a Governor about to read Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. He would pull his chair up to the window, wipe off his glasses, clear his throat and when Dick thought he was about ready to start he would have to stop and pull off his apron. The performance made the cook good-natured for a week.

In the bottom of Dick's war-sack was a pile of twenty letters that had never been opened. They bothered Dick, and he often wondered what was in them. He knew they were from Pat. The cook had the laugh on Dick when he read the first one, and that never happened again. Pat knew Dick couldn't write, and never expected an answer.

CHAPTER XVII

Satan's Segundo

FIVE years of big crops and prosperity among the farmers made money easy and the open patches of range, scattered here and there, were covered with bunches of horses. The stray horses they claimed led their horses off and mixed them up, so a government roundup was suggested. They went through the law books and found that all strays and unbranded stock could be gathered by the government and sold at auction. Every farmer in the country signed the petition and they sent it to headquarters at Edmonton.

Red Coon was in Edmonton, loafing around. Because of his own knowledge of the southern Alberta prairies and his reputation for being the best brand reader in the country, he landed the job as foreman of the government roundup. His tough old hide was boiling for revenge against the farmers that had taken the prairie.

It was a regular reunion of the range. Cowboys came from everywhere, honest riders, grub-line riders, horse thieves, and would-be cowboys. Even old farmers with a few horses out sent their boys, rather than pay the two and a half dollars it would cost to get the horses that were picked up. That's where the snag came, for the farmers. They thought only the strays and ranch horses would be picked up.

At noon riders and bunches of horses started pouring in. They were in the thick of the farmer settlement and by the time the last of them came in, hell started in the camp. Farmers were flocking from everywhere, some in their buggies and wagons, and others lumbering across the prairies on big, awkward work horses boiling over at every jump. Red Coon met them all.

The Mounted Police with his red jacket and yellow stripes down his black pants, rode out in clear sight. That calmed the farmers a bit for Red Coon. They knew a Mounted Police wouldn't be there unless the outfit was backed up by the law.

It cost those farmers two dollars and a half a head to get their horses out of the bunch! They had invited something to the country they didn't want. The cowboys laughed and yelled, "Two fifty a piece, please!" As each farmer came up the cowboys cut out the brands they asked for, while Coon's secretary relieved them of the two fifty.

Daylight on the fourth morning found the roundup spread, cowpunchers milling everywhere, roping and saddling horses, rolling their beds into the wagons, jerking down rope corrals and tents. Others sat crosslegged on the ground around the cook fire eating breakfast.

A black speck showed on the skyline with the morning sun; Red Coon's eagle eye caught it. He swore and took a chew of tobacco. A few minutes later Gopher Dick fanned his saddlehorses into the cavvy, and rode up to Coon.

"Come to join your outfit," he said to Coon. Coon's jaw set as he eyed Dick. "You don't join this outfit, Dick, you're three days late."

"Is that so!" Dick sprang to the ground and slapped Coon in the face with his hat. Dick knew he was big enough to do the job he had wanted to do for years! Dick's fist sounded on Coon's face like a triphammer. He stumbled backwards and fell in a heap.

Dick jumped over him, stooped down, and hollered in his ear, "Beller, you old bull. I been waitin' for this since you hired that pick-up man at Medicine Hat to ride into me."

Coon rose to his feet, blood running from his nose and mouth. He made a swing, but Dick ducked under it and came up landing a hard one on Coon's jaw.

Coon lay silent. His eyes rolled and watered a bit in the morning light as the Mounted Police ran between them. Coon's face looked like a map of the Rockies. It was black and blue with high spots and low. One eye was black, swelled shut, and four of his big yellow teeth were knocked out.

Dick laughed and said:

"Well, Coon, looks like you'd have to bite your tobacco out the other side the plug now, but that big hole in front will be powerful handy to spit through!"

The police said: "Dick, looks like you'd have to leave the outfit!"

"And do it damn quick," Coon added.

"Shut up," Dick answered. "They'll be four or five days before you can talk plain."

Dick turned to the policeman:

"What's the idee, Coon tryin' to keep me off this roundup? It's government, ain't it? And I'm representin' the Rocking H, one of the oldest brands on this range."

"Yes, but you wasn't here on the start," Coon said. "You're three days late!"

"All right," snapped Dick back, "but you ain't got far enough east yet to pick up any Rocking H horses. Does a man have to foller this outfit out from Edmonton?"

"Rules is rules and I'm runnin' it!" Coon bellowed.

Dick jumped to hit Coon but the police grabbed him.

"Arrest him and lock him up for fightin'. That'll keep him off the roundup," Coon said.

At that the Mounted Police saw through it all. Coon wanted Dick out of the way, so he could hold the Rocking H horses for revenge. The police said:

"You boys had better get together and settle this."

"Settle nothin'! He can't ride on this outfit!" bellowed Coon.

"I'm not runnin' this roundup," the police shouted. "Whatever Coon says goes!"

DICK saw the boys were with him. He climbed up on the mess wagon.

"If the boys say I was wrong, I'll go home and buy the Rocking H horses out of the roundup. If not, Coon lets me stay. Majority rules. Every man that's in favor of me stayin' step over to the right."

Coon half lost his breath—every man left him. Dick stood grinning, silent for a minute, while he rolled a cigarette.

Coon was no fool. He saw Dick had the shackles on him. "All right!" he said. "We'll call it square this time. You won, but when the roundup is over you'll pay fer sneakin' a girl across the bound'ry line, and stealin' horses out of Montana!"

The crowd hooted and yelled. They knew the Circle H horses had been stolen from the Rocking H, and Dick had never been seen with a girl. But that told Dick that Coon had been connected up with the Wolfe and Slim Anderson. Dick wondered if there was a chance that the old Wolfe was still alive.

Dick followed the roundup right through till it stopped in what was known as Buffalo Bone Pasture on Belly River, where one of the biggest buffalo trails crossed the river. In early days millions of buffalo had been killed there. A canyon ran down from the south and emptied into the river, and straight across one like it came down from the north. Dick rode the length of these canyons. He could see that at one time the whole bottoms had been filled with buffalo bones.

It was hard work for a man, cutting and slashing the big bunch to get his horses out. But the punchers helped one another. Coon inspected every bunch that passed, especially Dick's herd—he wanted to catch Dick with a stray or unbranded horse so he could pin something on him! As Dick drove his bunch off, he met with Dave Russell, the roundup cook, who was riding an old saddle horse he had forked. The two of them started the Rocking H horses toward the ranch.

As the days passed, the bunch of horses in Buffalo Bone Pasture slowly cut down. Ranchers, farmers, miners, and cowpunchers came and took horses out. Some had strayed three hundred miles from their homes. The remainder were sold by government and shipped to all points of the world.

Once more the prairie had seen a big change. The day of the horse, like that of the buffalo, had faded into memory. The Rocking H ranch was rocking on its last legs. All the way across the prairie Dick had talked to Dave Russell about the finances of the ranch. He knew he could trust Dave, for he had always been close to Hank Hyde and his family. Dave

had been well educated, he came from a good family in the East.

He advised Dick first to sell some of the ranch. The land was worth twenty-five and thirty dollars an acre. Hyde had bought most of it for two and a half to ten dollars an acre. But Dick couldn't see this, for he dreamed of the day when he might be able to own it. If he held it all, there would be plenty for him to run what stock he wanted. Finally Dick could hold back no longer. Mrs. Hyde was seriously sick in the East and the mortgage was crowding him.

Old Dave had been sober for some time. He looked like a new man with a shave and a clean pair of overalls and a shirt. He had made the old ranch cook quit blowing about the hog-counting education, and read the letters for Dick.

Finally Dick took him into his confidence. They rode out and dug up the hidden cache of money. They spent the evening counting it. The total was five thousand in gold and the rest in Canadian bank notes. It nearly took old Dave's breath away; he looked at Dick out of the corner of his eye.

"Well, you dirty little horn-toad. You did rob that bank up north!"

"No, I didn't," said Dick. "I robbed the guy that robbed the bank. They made the mistake of holdin' me for robbin' the bank and made me so mad doin' it I kept the money."

"What are you aimin' to do now, buy the ranch and marry that pretty girl what's back East with the missus and Ann?"

"No—gosh, no," Dick stammered. "She ain't lookin' at an ignorant cowhand like me." He turned crimson under the penetrating leer of the old cook until Dave, grinning at his companion, reached out and slapped him on the back.

"Dick, you're so damn lucky if you fell into a big bog hole you come out smellin' like a rose! You can't use this money in a lump to buy this ranch. The bank's got the number on all them bills and if you turn it in, the feller you was dealin' with would wonder where you got it—that's too big a wad for kids to carry around—all the cowpunchers on the prairie ain't saved that much money!"

Dave slumped into a chair and commenced scratching his head. "Gawd, boy! If I had a couple of drinks I could think better!"

"That's just it, Dave, you promised to lay off whiskey for a year if I'd give you this job. I'd give it to you anyhow, but I got your promise, that if you stick with me, old age won't find you out in a snowdrift!"

Dave shot out his hand, saying, "Boy, I'm with you!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A Challenge Accepted

IT was the next morning at breakfast table when Dave grabbed the idea of how to change the money. Soon after he appeared in his worst clothes. He threw the toughest looking pack outfit on the place on a horse, and saddled another one. The money was put in one pack bag, and a little grub in the other.

He tied a ragged and dirty bed on top and hung a battered old coffee pot and frying pan on the outside. Dave and his outfit looked as if they had been through the Yukon backwards. Dick laughed as Dave started out, headed for Sweet Grass on the boundary line.

When he reached Sweet Grass, he split the bills up in small bunches and hid them around in the room he rented in the second story of a livery stable. When the boys came in to join Dave a few minutes at night they never saw anything worth stealing—but Dave locked his door when he left it!

The banks on both sides of the line were used to making big money exchanges for people crossing the line. United States money had full value in Canada, and the Canadian money they had in banks was worth more to Dave—at least than what he had! He bought some new clothes and dressed up like a millionaire and exchanged a few thousand at each bank; then the next day he put on his greasy outfit and exchanged a few more.

Dave's name changed with his clothes, but he had a lot to trade. He grew a little scared of this racket, so he posed as a horse buyer, and to every man that blew into town with horses old Dave offered aid. He traveled with the horse men, making it a point to show up whenever there was a bunch of horses inside. He talked big business from morning till night, and slipped a thousand wherever

there was a chance to trade. He'd buy and sell horses or anything else, without making a cent of profit.

For years now Dick had nursed the hope of some day calling the Rocking H his own. Somewhere in the back of his mind, was the vain, hopeless yet persistent vision of Pat as an essential part of his dream—Pat as he first remembered her, in overalls, with the legs stuffed down into her boot-tops, blue denim shirt open at the neck, big black hat, almost hiding her short, light hair, and lips that smiled with a flash of white, even teeth. But most of the time he kept such memories pushed back and bolted down. She belonged now to a different world, a world where he couldn't and wouldn't follow her. Yet even as he told himself this, it was dawning upon Dick that horses were not the only dominant, undisputed interest in life. The Rocking H was his world—but it needed Pat.

It was fall before he knew it. The wind whistled as it whipped around the corner of the house; and as Dick sat by the fire, worried and blue, he listened to the suck and hiss of the wind as it tore under the eaves. It already had the same howl and moan that sounded in winter blizzards. The northern lights streaked the sky in long silver bars. The coyotes and wolves had changed their summer yelp to a long, lonesome wail.

Dick stirred, as a heavy pound came on the door. It flew open, almost torn from the hinges, and old Dave Russell stood in the doorway, like a picture in a frame—the same old clothes he had left in, ragged, greasy and worn; but under his arm, against his fat sides, he carried a dirty old gunny-sack of—something. Dick felt as if he had been born again, when old Dave shoved out his big, rough hand for a shake.

"I brought her back, boy, in good legal currency," and he tipped the sack upon the table. Out rolled a couple of old dirty shirts and old socks that changed the atmosphere of the room. "Boy, I've had a rough time of it, though. Where's yer jug? I ain't took a drink since I left! Why, I'm so dry, I feel like an old barrel that's about to fall to staves!"

After the money had been counted and put back in the sack, Dick brought out a letter from Mrs. Hyde. Dave tore it open, and with one glance over the first page, he hit the table with his fist.

"Gi'me another drink! Damn that red blister of a Coon! He's made an offer to buy the Rockin' H, and Mrs. Hyde's considerin' it! I'll fix him. You want this ranch, don't you, Dick?"

"Sure!" answered Dick. "It's the only place in the whole country." He hesitated, glanced at old Dave doubtfully, half opened his lips, struggling against a lifelong reticence. Old Dave eyed him thoughtfully.

"Boy," he said, "I'm thinkin' there's someone else besides yerself yer want the Rockin' H for." He was half prepared to see Dick spring up and streak out of the room, as he used to do when the boys razzed him. But now, though swift color flooded Dick's face, he met his old friend's kindly glance steadily.

"Sure!" he said simply.

"Then don't be so damned slow! Get me that jug of whiskey!" roared Dave, his face getting redder every second. "And throw me on some coffee—and a half dozen eggs! I'm goin' East right now; fact is, I'm halfways there. Makin' up my mind was always the hardest job to me!" Seizing his glass, he did full justice to the whiskey jug this time, saying fervently, "To hell with the red blister!"

An hour later Dave was mounted on a fresh horse, with his greasy old innocent looking sack tied on behind him.

"See you in hell, son!" he shouted back over his shoulder, as he disappeared in the dark.

AFTER Dave had gone, Dick was more lonely than ever before in his life. But he was too busy to brood. The cowboys rode long hours in the saddle, yet they did their best to cheer him up. Dick bought pastures and straw stacks from the farmers to feed his cattle on—there were plenty of oats and wheat straw that made good winter feed. The farmers rushed to Dick to sell it to him for little or nothing.

Dick waited to hear from Dave in the East; but not a word came until late in February. The days wore off like millions of centuries; then a rider came in one day from Medicine Hat, and told Dick that there was a gentleman in town by the name of Mr. Dave Russell, that wished to see him soon as he could come

in. Dick laughed at the "Mr." That wasn't what Dave looked like when he left!

For a day and a half Dick and his horse slowly plowed their way through the snow drifts to Medicine Hat. He found him so duded up, Dick scarcely knew him, with an uptown suit, low-neck shoes—and a white collar, that gave old Dave the appearance for once in his life of having a neck.

He was in the lobby of the hotel, leaning back in a chair, with his feet cocked up on a writing desk. Dick watched him for a minute. He was smoking a cigar, blowing what he thought were rings up at the ceiling, and giving his long black mustache a twist now and then. It reminded Dick of steer horns.

Dick threw his hat at him. It hit Dave in the face, his feet went up and his chair tipped backwards. Dick roared with laughter as old Dave sprang up, with his fist doubled, squeezing the life out of his cigar.

"Go fer 'em!" Dick yelled.

"Well, I'm a son of a gun!" Dave said. "For two cents I'd beat your damn ears down till you could drink out of 'em." In less than a second Dave had pardoned him.

"Well, how did you make out in the East?"

"I don't think I'll tell you—there's a few things you got to do. If you do what I say, you'll get the Rockin' H—if you don't, you won't! I'm your old dad, all you need is a little decent raisin'—it might make a man out of you!"

"Well, what is it?" Dick said.

"I've got quite a surprise for you, Dick—and a lot of business to fix up. You go over across the street to the Justice of the Peace. See that little office across the road?" And he pointed through the window. "Git a-goin' and I'll be over in a few minutes."

Dick was puzzled as he walked across the street and entered the office.

A few minutes later Dave threw open the door and moved to one side. A girl, wrapped in a fur coat, stood in the doorway. Dick just glanced at her and then dropped his head. He was half dizzy as he looked up a second time. It was Pat.

"Hello, Dick!" she said.

Old Dave laughed and turned to the Justice of the Peace, saying:

"Can you marry these two kids for me?" The Justice of the Peace rose from his chair.

"Sure, if it's all right with them," he said in a slow drawl.

Dick jumped to his feet, his face flushed, and his eyes glistened like sharp steel. The two might have been alone in the world together, for all that he saw or cared for the others. He stood there, looking straight at Pat, and she at him. A rich color had flooded up over her face, which had a new, strange tensity. Then suddenly it broke into the old, sunny smile, with a swift flash of those white teeth. She put her hand out to him. Dick took it and stared steadily at her face.

"All right!" he said. "It's a go with me!" So simple a thing as that was their plighting of troth.

AS the Justice of the Peace finished the ceremony, Dave stepped up and held out some papers to Dick, saying:

"Here's yer first weddin' present"—it was the deed to the Rocking H—"an' may the devil take the first one that comes between you!" He laughed as he put an arm around each of them and walked out of the door.

It was late when the three mounted their horses and rode back toward the Rocking H. A soft chinook breeze blew across the snow and the sun tipped into the red. Somehow it presently came about that Dave's horse dropped behind the others, and Pat and Dick closed in and rode on side by side into the dusk.

Dick suddenly found his tongue. Talking to Pat was strangely like thinking aloud—only much better. He felt as though he had been talking to her all his life.

"I've wanted you always, Pat, even way back at the Wolfe's den, when you looked more like a boy than a girl, only your face was rounder. You was just a poor, brave, half starved kid, an' I wanted to take you away, an' stuff you with food. I think," said Dick, in slow self-wonder, "that it began then—only I was jest too dumb to know it."

"That didn't matter." And even in the pale moonlight he caught the swift flash of her careless smile and the gleam of those even teeth. "That didn't matter, because, you see, I knew, even then!"

Then Pat and Dick, oblivious of the cold, rode slowly on side by side.

The Suicide Brand

By CLINT DOUGLAS

Two deputies of Hellspur had disappeared. Their horses—saddles empty—were found in front of their office. Their six-guns—one shot fired—were hanging on their saddle-horns. Then young Cutty Lorant became the third deputy—and buckled on suicide sixes!

HARD-EYED men were gathered there in front of the deputy sheriff's office. They were looking at the deputy's paint pony. The paint just stood there at the hitchrack. Its deep saddle was empty. There were no signs of hard trail on its brown and white hide. Nothing, at first glance, to make an hombre curious. Yet those grim-faced gents crowded closer.

Up to the fringe of the crowd rode a young, black-haired puncher. He peered curiously at the paint—then at its empty saddle. He made out a belt or something looped over the saddle-horn and hanging down on the other side of the pony. Touching spurs, the puncher half-circled the men for a better look.

Leaning closer in the gathering dusk, he saw that that something was a belt—a cartridge belt studded with brass shells. A low-cut holster swung from the belt. And in the holster was a pearl-handled Colt. It was this Colt that held the interest of the stern-visaged men.

"Hellish! . . . . That's what it is!" muttered a heavy-set man at the puncher's right stirrup. The speaker was big and beefy. His form-fitting dark blue coat and black hat gave him the air of a man of importance—perhaps a saloon owner.

The puncher, one Cutty Lorant of the Brazos country, leaned over and touched the big man on the shoulder.

"Not meanin' to intrude on your business, pardner—but I'm powerful curious."

Hugh Price, the heavy-set owner of the Blue Chip saloon, studied Cutty's brown face for a brief moment. Then he said, "That there horse an' gun belong to Deputy Ted Palmer." Hugh Price spread his big hands to include the whole town. "The deputy ain't to be found nowhere. Plumb disappeared off the earth!"

Two kerosene lamps in the general store across the street blazed into light. A shadowy, yellow glow bathed that grim knot of men.

Suddenly, into this flickering yellow light, appeared a wide-eyed girl.

The sight of her made Cutty sit up and stare. She was lovely. But to Cutty, just in from a long, hard trail, she was the most beautiful creature in the world. She was tall, supple and blonde.

But Cutty grew taut in his saddle when a grief-stricken gasp tore out of the girl's throat. She, too, was looking at that pearl-handled Colt hanging from the saddle-horn. For a moment she stood rigidly still. Then her willowy body seemed to melt. A cowhand quickly reached out and braced her.

Cutty bent down to the big Price man. "That girl—" he whispered, "—who is she?"

Without taking his eyes from the girl's pale face, Price said, "Doris Palmer—the missin' deputy's sister."

And Doris Palmer slowly took a hold on herself. A slim, white hand jerkily brushed stray tendrils of golden hair from her face. She strode resolutely up to the hitched paint pony, and grasped that pearl-handled Colt.

Several of those hard-visaged men looked the other way. Seemed that they knew all about that shiny-stocked gun, and didn't want to see it proved.

The girl hesitated but a moment, then slid the six-iron from its dangling holster. She flicked out the cylinder. Her hands clenched into fists.

"One shot—fired—" her voice trailed off hoarsely.

Cutty's jaws clacked out an oath. He slid out of his saddle to face Hugh Price.

"Hell, man!" he grated. "What's the meanin' of all this?"

The big saloon keeper's face looked grotesque in that guttering, yellow lamplight.

"The last deputy to hold office—disappeared the same way. His horse was found standin' at the hitchrack. An' his gun was hangin' from his kakhorn—with one shell fired . . . . It's hellish!"

CUTTY looked over the heads of the men toward the blonde girl. She was standing there holding the pearl-handled gun in her two hands. Her blue eyes held a mute appeal as she looked at the circle of men about her. But not one of them moved to her side. They stood there as if fear feathers brushed their spines.

Then Cutty pushed forward. His muscled shoulder wedged in between two of the rooted men, shoving them apart. In a moment he was at the girl's side. Pulling off his big hat, he looked down at her.

"Can I be of service to you, Miss Palmer? Name's Cutty Lorant—" his whispering drawl drifted off inquiringly.

Doris Palmer had seen Cutty shoulder his way through the men. Her gratitude showed in a ghost of a smile. Then she held up the pearl-handled Colt. "My brother's gun," she said throatily. "He's gone—gone—like the last one—"

Cutty held out his hand for the six-gun. His teeth flashed in a friendly smile.

Doris silently handed him the Colt.

The men standing about hadn't heard his half-whispered words. But they saw his smile. And they saw Doris pass the gun into his hands. The fear feathers seemed to take leave of their spines. For they surged forward muttering questions to one another.

First among them was Hugh Price, the saloon owner. He strode right up to the girl, and familiarly patted her shoulder.

"Don't you worry, Doris. I'll get Ted—if he is to be got."

Cutty glanced up at Price's intonation of "Doris." He found the big man bending protectively over the girl. Then Cutty started. Doris' blue eyes were fixed steadily on him. She didn't even seem to hear what Price had said. Cutty quickly glued his eyes to the pearl-handled gun. He had asked her for the Colt. And now she was waiting for some word from him about it.

The cylinder of the gun, Cutty saw, held five brass cartridges. Four were shiny—one was smashed by the firing-pin. He snapped the cylinder behind the barrel, and closely examined the whole weapon.

"Hmmm!" he muttered. There were flakes of dried mud caked around the screw-head holding the imitation pearl stocks to the metal frame. Cutty looked over to Price.

"Had a right dry summer hereabouts, haven't you?"

Before Price could answer, Doris said, "Yes. Hellspur has been as dry as dust."

Hugh Price moved closer to Cutty. "What's that got to do with the missin' deputy?"

"Maybe nothin'," said Cutty. "An' again—maybe heaps." He held up the Colt. "But it's mighty strange when a dry country has a six-iron—plastered with mud."

Price's beefy face changed color. The men crowded about in that guttering yellow lamplight, looked uneasily at each other.

One muttered, "Mud! We ain't seen none in months."

Cutty picked up one of the paint pony's forelegs. Then he dropped it again.

"No mud on the paint's shoes," he said.

Hugh Price gave Doris' shoulder a parting pat. "I'm gonna wire Sheriff Janton at Twin Arrows, an' tell him to come a-foggin'." Then he grinned at Cutty. "Come up to the Blue Chip any time an' hoist a couple on the house."

"Thanks," nodded Cutty. "I'll sure remember that."

Price touched his hat to Doris, and strode off down the dark street to the telegraph office.

The crowd broke up, went off in groups, talking in hushed voices.

Cutty found himself alone with the girl.

"Miss Palmer," he said, "I'd be plumb pleased to see you home."

"We—" she hesitated on that word, "—Ted and I live about a mile down the road."

Cutty slid the missing deputy's gun into the holster on the pommel. He looked at the significant empty saddle a mo-

ment, then calling his roan, he helped her into the saddle.

Taking the reins of the roan and paint in his hand, he walked along beside her. The town of Hellspur fell behind them. Now the night was silent except for the clump-clump of the horses' hooves and the jingling of Cutty's spur chains. He looked up at the somber-faced girl.

"I'm not meanin' to horn in on your business, Miss Palmer, I'm interested. Figger I might be able to help you some."

Doris smiled faintly. "Thank you, friend. I'm glad some one is interested." Then her eyes flashed angrily. "Not one man in that town would lift his finger to find Ted. They're all afraid—of something!"

Nodding thoughtfully, the puncher rolled a cigarette with his free hand. Then he asked, "When did you see your brother last, Miss Palmer?"

"It was this afternoon—about four o'clock. Ted said he was going to the Blue Chip and then to the telegraph office."

Cutty's sputtering match stopped before it reached his cigarette. "Know what he was going to the telegraph office for?"

The blonde said, "No. Ted didn't tell me. But—maybe—"

Cutty dropped the match as it burnt his fingers. "Maybe what?" he prompted.

"Ted told me about a warning he found in his office yesterday. It said to give up his job—or he would follow the last deputy—"

"Reckon that's what he was gonna telegraph the sheriff about," said Cutty.

"I don't think so. Ted laughed at the warning—said it was nothing." The girl choked back a sob.

Cutty scratched another match and got his cigarette going. "Shucks, Miss Palmer, I'll 'low this all looks kinda bad right now—but there ain't no call for any real worryin'."

The girl's hand clasped tightly over his on the reins. "Then—then you don't think that—that Ted—"

"No, ma'am," Cutty's voice strove to be convincing. "Don't seem reasonable that they'd be hidin' him—if he weren't alive."

For minutes neither spoke. Suddenly Doris pulled up.

"Here's where I live."

Cutty helped her down before a trim little one-story house.

"Won't you come in, Mister—"

"Jus' Cutty, Miss Palmer. An' many thanks—but I better get goin' back to town. Later on, I'll sure remember your invite." Then he took the paint back to the stable and unsaddled it. Coming back to the porch, he gave the girl the pearl-handled Colt.

"You'd best take care of this six-iron. Reckon the sheriff will be plumb interested in seein' that mud."

Doris took the gun, then held out her hand. "Thanks for helping, Cutty."

He took her hand. "Sure hope I can be a real help, Miss Palmer. This whole business jus' stuck in my craw. An' like the curious cat—I've done stuck my head into it." Cutty swung aboard his roan. "*Adios*, Miss Palmer. Don't you worry none."

THE Blue Chip saloon was different from any Cutty had ever seen. The bar was a huge rough-hewn affair, a relic of pioneer days. The walls were massive and high. And the rafters supporting the heavy roof were stout, thick logs.

Entirely different from the other buildings of the town, this saloon was. The others were newer and of a more modern modeling.

Cutty wondered at this as he shouldered through the big swinging doors. He clumped over to the bar, and slapping down a silver cartwheel called for a drink. Then leaning his back against the bar, he hooked a heel on the rail and looked at the men about him.

Slowly, the muscles in Cutty's dark face tightened. The roughness and toughness of the saloon's structure had nothing on the men within its walls. He found himself looking at the hardest crew of unhung criminals he had ever laid his two eyes on. Most of them wore two guns. And those who didn't, had suspicious bulges under their left armpits.

Cutty found himself the cynosure of their sullen stares. He cuffed his John B. back on his head, and gave them stare for stare. Looked like he had a lot of steam to let off, and welcomed the chance to let it off through his gun-barrel.

Then Cutty found one smiling face in that sea of sullen ones. It belonged to an old-timer whose white hair was matted over a weather-seamed forehead. That old-timer raised his glass, calling out:

"Here's to yuh, stranger."

Cutty grinned. "Lookin' at you, dad." And he tossed off his drink.

The old fellow jerked his head to the empty chair beside him. Cutty grinned again, and picking up his glass and a bottle crossed the room.

"Pop Hankins, they call me," said the white-haired man.

"Howdy, Pop. Cutty Lorant's my handle. Glad to meetcha."

They shook on it.

"I wanta thank yuh," began Pop, "for walkin' up to Miss Doris the way yuh did. Me, I was plumb hogtied in my tracks. Seein' Ted Palmer's hoss standin' there with his short-gun hangin' on the kak sure had me thrown complete. Jus' like the last deputy—"

"How long was the last deputy in office?" Cutty's whispering drawl came around his cigarette.

Pop scratched his leathery chin reflectively. "Maybe 'bout a year. Then day before yesterday—he jus' plain disappears."

Slowly, Cutty nodded his head. "That leaves only two days in office for Ted Palmer. Say, Pop, do you figger that exploded shell in Ted Palmer's six means he was killed by the slug from it?"

"Reckon that's the only figgerin' to do, lad."

"But that six had mud on it," pointed out Cutty.

"Ain't got no answer for that. Nearest mud here'bouts is the Crazy Hoss River. An' Crazy Hoss is better'n ten miles north o' here." Pop's seamed face wrinkled in a frown. "Don't be forgettin' there was no mud on the paint's feet."

"I'm not." Cutty snapped his cigarette to the sawdust and spiked it with his heel. He shot a quick glance over Pop's shoulder toward an opening door in the rear of the saloon. "Looks like we're gonna be honored by the company o' Mister Hugh Price."

With a worried expression on his beefy face, Hugh Price came up to the table. He nodded to Pop, then spoke to Cutty:

"I was so up in the air about that deputy's horse an' gun that I plumb forgot introductions. I'm Hugh Price."

"Cutty Lorant's the name, Price. Howdy."

Price sat down and rested both arms on the table. "Ridin' through, Lorant?"

"I was figgerin' on goin' up to the big roundup at Twin Arrows. The dry season's kinda delayed 'em. With the steers roamin' in search o' water, I reckoned they could use some extry cowhands."

"Right," agreed Price. "The Streak-7 an' Rafter-J are takin' on a lot o' punchers. You'll be in good time for a little pay dirt."

Cutty shook his black head. "I said I *was* figgerin' on goin' up. Howsomever, this deputy business has made me plumb curious. Fact is, I'm tempted to take that deputy job."

The saloon owner sat up with a jerk. "Gosh, fella, you ain't forgettin' the hellish thing what happened to the last two deputies?" Price's jaws snapped together. "I wouldn't take that cussed job for all the *dinero* in this part o' the country. Hell—no! My horse an' gun ain't gonna be found standin' out there in the road."

Cutty's dark face flashed a smile. "That makes the job more interestin' to a nosey jasper like me."

Old Pop Hankins looked at Cutty, a twinkle in his faded eyes. The big Price gent had nothing to say for a moment. He twisted in his creaking chair, and bellowed to the wizened little swamper:

"Get another bottle over here, yuh lazy sack o' bones!"

But before the frightened little swamper could reach the bar, something happened outside to distract the attention of every one in the saloon.

A GALLOPING horse slid to an abrupt stop at the swinging doors. Quick, angry footsteps clumped across the wooden porch. The doors swished open and slapped back against the wall. Into the saloon stomped a gaunt, falcon-faced hombre. On his flapping cowhide vest glinted a sheriff's star.

"What in all hell is goin' on in this town?" he barked at every one in general. Then: "Where's Price?"

"Right here, sheriff," said Price, getting to his feet and approaching the lawman with outstretched hand.

Sheriff Janton ignored Price's hand. "When was Ted Palmer seen around last?" he demanded.

"Pop," whispered Cutty, "I kinda favor that Johnny Law. He shows plumb good taste in his handshakin'."

Hugh Price squarely faced the angry sheriff. "Ain't seen Palmer since he was in here gettin' a drink."

"What time was that?"

"Reckon I can say it was 'xactly four o'clock, sheriff. Ain't seen nothin' of him since."

"How come you remember *exactly?*" asked the sheriff suspiciously.

Cutty ran his tongue along his cigarette to seal the brown paper. As he reached to his hat band for a match, he said:

"If you don't mind me buttin' in, sheriff, maybe-so I can help a mite." The falcon-faced lawman snapped around. Cutty went on, "Miss Doris told me that she last saw her brother 'bout four o'clock. He was gonna stop here—"

"Where do you come in on this?" the sheriff butted in.

Old Pop Hankins sat up in his chair. "Hol' yuhr hosses, Janton, yuh ole fire-eater. Cutty Lorant's a pard o' mine. He's the gent what went up to Miss Doris when all o' us stood 'round like scairt rabbits."

The sheriff smiled at Pop's heated defense. "Take 'er easy, Hank—you'll last longer." He came over with a clink of spurs. "What's eatin' this town, Hank? Two lawmen disappear! Then the whole town gets chicken-livered! What the hell's it all mean?"

"Dunno," frowned Pop. "Ted Palmer jus' went off into thin air. His hoss an' short-gun was left jus' like the other deputy's." Then Pop hastily corrected himself. "Exceptin' one thing—"

Janton tensed forward. "An' that, Hank—"

Pointing to Cutty, Pop said, "This here lad discovered there was *mud* on that short-gun's grips. Figger that one out, Janton. *Mud!* An' after the summer we've been through!"

The lawman's eyes squinted. Looked like he thought Pop was running a fast one on him. Still squinting, he spoke:

"Like to see that *muddy* hog-leg."

Hugh Price called over from the bar, "Reckon Doris has her brother's gun. I'll send one of the boys—"

He didn't finish, for Cutty Lorant broke in with, "Sure, sheriff. Miss Palmer has that six. I told her to watch it careful as I figgered you'd want to see it. I'll—"

The lawman shook his head. "You stay here, Lorant. I wanta talk to you." Then he turned to Pop. "You fog out there, Hank, an' fetch that hog-leg. I'm powerful interested in seein' it."

Pop Hankins got up. "Sure will." He brushed right past Hugh Price and shoved through the swinging doors.

"Now, Lorant," said the sheriff, "suppose we go down to the deputy's office."

Cutty got up slowly, glanced sideways at the John Law. He nodded and led the way out of the Blue Chip.

SHERIFF JANTON seated himself behind the deputy's desk. He leaned back in the squeaky swivel chair, and looked steadily at Cutty.

"So you offered to help Doris Palmer when the rest of the town had a bad case of chicken guts—that right?"

Cutty perched himself on the edge of the desk. He nodded. "Yep. But I don't see nothin' special extry 'bout that. Any jasper in his right mind would've—"

"A lot of jaspers didn't," pointed out Janton. "The whole town is boogery about somethin'—" he stopped. "Where you from, Lorant?"

"Brazos country," replied Cutty readily. "Used to punch for Wes Hanford on the Runnin'-8."

"Hanford," murmured Janton. "Is that Hanford—the poker sharp?" He fixed the puncher with a keen, steady look.

Cutty's teeth flashed in a wide smile. "Yep, sure is. In the four years I rode for Hanford, I never knew him to clean up a poker game once."

The sheriff chuckled. "That's Wes Hanford all right." Janton's eyes got more friendly. "Hmmm. Four years with Wes is good recommendation, Lorant."

A running horse kicked up dust in front of the office. Old Pop Hankins slid from the saddle and clumped inside. He waved the missing deputy's pearl-handled Colt angrily.

"Lissen to this, Janton!" he yelled. "I rid up an' chased some low-down skunk outa Doris' house. He was in there wipin' the mud offen this here short-gun. Look-it—wiped clean!"

Cutty came around the desk. "Is Doris—all right—"

"Sure. The skunk didn't do nothin' but clean off the mud."

The puncher moved toward the door. "You didn't leave Doris—"

"Nope. Keep your shirt on, lad. I jus' took Doris to the hotel. She's safe here in town."

Sheriff Janton closely inspected the Colt. Then he dropped it on the desk. His leathery face wrinkled in a frown. He looked across at Pop.

"I'm needed bad at that big Twin Arrows roundup. The cattlemen are growin' uneasy about rustlers. But this here—"

Cutty put himself in front of the sheriff. "How 'bout signin' me up for deputy—until Ted Palmer gets back, anyway?"

"Sure," said Pop. "Cutty's jus' the lad."

"You bet," pressed Cutty. "I've horned into this thing—an' it's ornery enough to make me curious—"

"Curious!" snorted Pop with a wink to the sheriff. "That's another name for sparkin'—sparkin' Doris Palmer."

"Anyway," broke in the sheriff, "I'm gonna take a chance on Lorant. I gotta get back to that roundup—no two ways 'bout it. All right. Hold up your right hand, Lorant."

Cutty Lorant was sworn in as deputy sheriff of Hellspur.

"I didn't bring no tin badge," finished the sheriff. "But that there six-cylinder badge on your hip will be good enough."

The new deputy nodded grimly. Then he turned to Old Pop Hankins. "My first official act is to make you assistant deputy. Will you ride out to the Crazy Horse River an' read sign. I can't figger that mud comin' from any other place."

Sheriff Janton nodded approvingly. "That's a good start, Lorant. Hank here can read sign better'n a dozen Injuns—night or day."

When Pop rode off into the night, Cutty said:

"Jus' one thing more before you go, sheriff. Miss Palmer said as how her brother got a warnin' to quit his job—"

"He never told me anything about it," cut in the lawman.

"That's jus' the point, sheriff. Miss Palmer also told me that the last time she saw her brother he was headed for the Blue Chip—an' then the telegraph office. I figgered he was going to send you a telegram 'bout the warnin'."

"Never got it."

Cutty jerked his thumb in the direction of the Blue Chip. "That means Ted Palmer got no farther than Mister Price's saloon."

"Gawd!" muttered Janton. "This thing looks bad to me. Damn that roundup! But tomorrow night the two ranches start their drive. Soon as they get off, I'll come down with a posse."

Cutty stood on the porch of the deputy's office and waved the sheriff off. Then he started off on foot for the Blue Chip.

AT THE swinging doors of the saloon, he loosened his walnut-gripped .44 in his holster. Then throwing away his cigarette, he pushed into the kerosene-lighted room.

Hugh Price turned from the bar, his glass halfway to his mouth. He put the glass down and faced Cutty. The new deputy crunched across the sawdust to his side.

"Evenin', Mister Price . . . . Meet the deputy sheriff o' Hellspur."

Price leaned forward confidentially. His voice was toneless, matter-of-fact. "You're diggin' your own grave, Lorant."

Cutty leaned easily against the bar as if talking to his best friend. "Graves—" the puncher's drawl was barely a whisper, "—always remind me of dirt . . . . Maybe *mud*—eh, Price?"

The big saloon owner nodded. "Maybe, Lorant. Maybe." Me motioned the barkeep, and spoke in a voice loud enough to carry to every corner of the saloon. "Set up one for Deputy Sheriff Lorant!"

Cutty felt something like an electric shock run around the room. Men stiffened. Card games were forgotten. All eyes centered on him . . . . For he was the third deputy. He was stepping into the dread office of deputy sheriff. Two before him had disappeared . . . .

The crowd in the Blue Chip looked upon him with mixed emotions. Was he to break the jinx on the deputies? Or was his horse—saddle empty—to be found in the road? Was his six-gun—one shot fired—to be found hanging from his kak-horn?

Hugh Price once more relaxed against the bar. He lowered his voice. "It's not too late, Lorant."

"Too late—for what?" Cutty rested his left arm on the bar. His right hung innocently enough at his side.

"To travel on to Twin Arrows—an' stick to cowpunchin'."

Cutty caught a movement on the bar. Puzzled, he let his eyes drop to his untouched whiskey glass. And his eyes stayed there. Reflected in the mirror-

like liquor was the big rafter directly above the bar. Watching that rafter, Cutty saw a section of it slowly slide back. And in the black hollow of the rafter appeared two glittering eyes staring down at him.

With a careless gesture, Cutty picked up the glass—"

"I dunno, Price—"

Then he dashed the raw whiskey into the big man's face. At the same moment, his right hand flicked up his .44. His thumb twitched. A bolt of gun-lead started for heaven.

The two eyes glittering down from the hollow rafter suddenly became three . . . . That third eye—round and ugly—gaped sightlessly between the first two.

Price let out a bellow, clawed for his gun. Cutty slashed Price's wrist with his .44 barrel. Another cut of that flashing .44 barrel, and Price crumpled to the sawdust floor unconscious.

Cutty faced the crowd. His whispering drawl was inviting, hopeful.

"Anybody else gettin' ambition?"

No one was. So Cutty poked the barkeep out from behind the bar, then lightly perched himself on its top. His black-mouthed .44 jutted out before him. It pointed to no one, yet seemed to cover all. He looked them all over, then jerked his left hand toward the door.

"Bar's closed . . . . Vamoose!"

At first those men of Hellspur didn't get the meaning of the deputy's words. They stood there, dumb-like.

Cutty smiled a little. "You gents don't seem to savvy my lingo." He tilted up his .44. "This here six-iron talks louder. Now, if any o' you gents are hard o' hearin'—"

There were muttered oaths from every corner of the room, but none were loud or direct. Money was scooped up from the tables. Then, slowly the men began to file out. They grumbled and shot sullen looks at the young deputy.

"Hey, Good-Lookin'," Cutty called to the barkeep. "Stick around."

When the last of the men had passed through the swinging doors, Cutty pointed to the barkeep with his .44.

"Close that storm door."

The bald-headed barkeep slid over a huge, solid sheet of wood like a barn door. This completely sealed the entrance to the saloon.

"Board up the windows," was Cutty's next order.

And when that was done, he said, "Now climb up here an' pull that breed outa the hollow rafter."

Cutty slid off the bar as the barkeep laboriously climbed up on it. The bald-headed man tugged and sweated. Finally, he pulled the dead breed out of the hollow rafter and let him thud to the floor. The breed lay a few feet from the still unconscious Price.

"One thing more," said Cutty. "Then you can lay off bar-tendin' for a while . . . . Take that breed over to the undertaker—with the compliments of the new deputy."

The barkeep dragged the body out onto the porch. Then just before he closed the storm door, he called out:

"We'll be *missin'* you next, mister deputy!" With that he hastily slammed the door.

Cutty took a basin of water from behind the bar and sloshed it over Hugh Price. Then, poking the wet and bedraggled man ahead of him, he started for the deputy's office.

TEN minutes later Hugh Price was sitting in a cell back of the office.

Cutty was leaning back in the swivel chair idly glancing over some "wanted" handbills. He looked over his shoulder toward the cell.

"Say, Price—are you ready to tell me where that mud came from?"

The barred door of the cell rattled violently.

"*Mud!* Before the night's over you'll wish to Gawd yuh never heard of it!" Hugh Price ranted on, "You'll get mud—six feet of it!"

Cutty leaned over in his chair and kicked shut the door leading back to the cell. Then he went on examining the handbills.

"Hmm. Hellspur's a mighty odd name for a town. Wonder—" He stopped. "Somethin' tells me that mud is plumb closer than the Crazy Horse."

No sooner had he said the words than Pop Hankins rode up, and stomped into the office. The old fellow shook his head at Cutty.

"There's no sign to read at all over Crazy Horse way. No siree! That mud on Ted Palmer's short-gun didn't come from the Crazy Horse."

Cutty nodded. "Thanks, Pop. We're sure o' one thing anyway. Ted Palmer—dead or alive—is still in Hellspur."

"Huh—?"

"Lissen, Pop, I've been thinkin' about the word 'Hellspur'. How did this town get it's name?"

The old fellow scratched his head. "That was a mite before my time, son. Reckon, howsomever, I oughta know it. Let's see—"

Cutty sat up with a jerk. "Was there ever a mine in these parts, Pop?"

"Mine?" echoed Pop. "Well now, reckon there was, son. I kinda recollect an ole coot tellin' of one."

"Pop," Cutty's eyes drilled into the old timer's. "If you've ever done any recollectin'—do it now!"

"Been a long time ago," muttered Pop vaguely. "If I ain't wrong, the story was somethin' about a mine spur what caved in. Yup! That's it. Ten miners was branchin' off in a spur an' the walls caved in, buryin' them all alive. When the poor critters was dug out—they were all dead. The mine didn't pay none after that, so it was forgotten. Fact is, Cutty, I don't even know where the mine was."

Cutty snapped to his feet. "We've got them now, Pop—if we ain't too late!"

B-B-r-r-r-i-n-g! It was the wall telephone.

The deputy looked at the battered clock on his desk. Two o'clock! Cutty wondered who could be calling at this hour of the morning. He looked at Pop, then went over and lifted the receiver.

"Deputy's office." Suddenly he tensed. "Thanks. I'll send Pop Hankins right down."

Cutty whirled on the old timer. "That was the hotel clerk. He says there is a jasper hangin' around the back of the hotel. Will you run down there, Pop? Maybe them polecats are fixin' to make a play against Doris Palmer."

"Dam' right I will!" Pop was halfway through the door, then he turned. "What you gonna do, son?"

"Never mind me, Pop. Don't reckon I'll need much help."

Pop hesitated a moment. "Figger it safe to leave Price here alone?"

"Sure. If them gunnies take him out—I'll jus' have to bring him back." And Cutty grinned. Pop waved, and rapidly clumped down the street.

Cutty quickly went out and took his blanket roll and lass rope from his saddle. Inside, he peeled off his shirt. Around his waist he snugly wound the rope, then pulled on his shirt again. From his blanket roll came a sheep wool lined jacket and a small canteen of brandy. Cutty pocketed the canteen. Then he slipped into the jacket, buttoning it all the way to his throat. Next he refilled the empty loops in his cartridge belt from a cardboard box of .44 shells.

This done, he left the light burning in the office and rapidly walked up the hill to the Blue Chip. For some time Cutty had been thinking of that strange saloon with its massive furnishings of an earlier day. Until now he couldn't figure the how-come. Pioneers must have built it up there on the hill for some definite reason. And they built it strongly to withstand the ravages of time. Maybe it was a monument of their own rough creation?

Cutty inserted the big key in the lock of the sliding door, while holding back one of the swinging doors with his shoulder. He quietly entered the gloomy, silent saloon, and closed the door back into place.

There was not a sound as he tensed there, hand on his .44 butt. Then he crossed the crunching sawdust floor to the bar. His spur chains clanked like the ringing of great bells, so oppressive was the silence of the big room. Cutty scratched a match. It came like a ghostly glare in the blackness of a tomb. He quickly lighted one of the kerosene lamps.

For the best part of an hour he poked around the saloon. Then he climbed atop the bar again, and, for the second time within that hour, inspected the hollowed rafter. He got down and started around the end of the bar. Something hit him behind the knees. His legs buckled.

SIX men suddenly appeared as if out of the earth. They landed on him in a body. A short, vicious battle was quickly ended. Cutty found himself bound hand and foot. His gun and cartridge belt were stripped from him.

Noiselessly, the men carried him behind the bar. A trap-door was pulled up on oiled hinges. The damp smell of earth came up out of the aperture made by the lifted trapdoor. Cutty was taken down a rough-hewn ladder. A candle gut-

tered. He found himself on a narrow ledge of rock under the floor of the saloon. At the other end of that ledge was darkness—and space.

His captors never spoke a word. They went about their work with a rapid silent efficiency. Now they bore Cutty to one side of the ledge. The deputy made out a large metal-bound bucket suspended on a stout cable. Beneath the huge bucket there seemed to be a lot of black space.

Cutty knew it was a mine shaft. Here, under the Blue Chip saloon, was the long abandoned mine of Hellspur. And with this revelation came a logical explanation for the strangeness of the saloon. The pioneers had probably erected it there as a haven where sorrows could be drowned in spirits and the tragedy of the mine forgotten.

Next thing he knew, Cutty was lifted over into the big bucket. Two grimly silent men got in with him. The others slowly lowered the bucket on its cable.

Down he went into the earth. What seemed ages later, the bucket touched solid ground. The candle in the hands of one of the men almost went out. He quickly shielded it with his hand. And by the light of that candle Cutty had noticed outcropping ledges of sharp rock all the way down. Once the wooden basket was almost impaled on one of those points.

At the bottom of the mine shaft, the two men lifted Cutty to the ground. The soil underfoot was damp, being fed by an underground stream. Cutty's eyes, becoming accustomed to the uncertain light, made out a motionless figure stretched on the floor of the mine. Cutty twisted his head back to his captors, asking:

"Is that Ted Palmer?"

Then for the first time the skinny man spoke, "That's Palmer all right." He pointed to a mound of earth that looked like a newly-made grave. "An' that's the other deputy. Palmer buried him." The man chuckled. "Like you're goin' to bury Palmer. I don't reckon there'll be another to bury you, so—" both men laughed, "—you'll have to dig your own grave. Won't be hard. The ground is tolerable soft."

Cutty now understood where the mud on the six-gun had come from.

At the sound of voices, Ted Palmer weakly raised himself to his elbows. But no sound came from his twitching lips.

One of the men saw Palmer move. He looked at the dying deputy, then turned back to Cutty with a judicious air. "Don't reckon you'll have more'n four-five hours before you can bury Palmer. This cozy little place has done a tolerable job on him."

Cutty's face contracted in a hard smile. "Mighty kind o' you gents to give me the run of the place, but—" he looked down at the ropes binding him, "—it's gonna be right hard to do much grave diggin'."

"That's the spirit," guffawed the skinny one. Then he took a gun from his pocket and trained it on Cutty's middle.

With a start, Cutty recognized that gun to be his own walnut-gripped .44.

The second man, a big hombre with a black head, stepped behind Cutty and slashed the ropes binding his hands and feet. Then he quickly moved over to the side of the skinny man with the gun. That man said:

"So you reco'nize your thumb-buster? Me I allus did favor these hammer-thumbin' sixes—so it's gonna be right easy shootin' you." The skinny man raised his bushy eyebrows in a grin. "Your takin' that deputy's job was jus' plain suicide. Yeh. An' we're gonna make it look like suicide—like them other two," he gestured toward Ted Palmer, and the newly-made grave against the wall. "We're gonna plug you with this thumb-buster—then hang it on your saddle for the folks o' Hellspur to shiver at."

Cutty suddenly leaped at the man. The men seemed to be expecting just such a move. And at the first tensing of Cutty's muscles, he calmly snapped the hammer of the .44.

A DEAFENING crash reverberated from the narrow confines of the mine tunnel.

Cutty's face screwed up horribly. He wrapped his arms around his stomach, spinning sideways from the impact of the heavy slug. Then he folded in half, and pitched forward to the floor of the mine. He lay there gasping.

A groan tore itself from the stiff lips of Ted Palmer. He slowly sank back to the ground.

The skinny man with the smoking .44 in his hand, turned casually to his

companion. "How's that for placin' them?"

The bearded fellow nodded admiringly. "If the monkey didn't load his gun with blanks, that slug in the stomach will keep him alive quite a spell."

"Blanks hell!" growled the skinny hombre. Then he grinned. "I looked at 'em first. Now we'll leave this candle here so he can have light to bury Palmer —an' to dig his own grave. Let's get goin', we gotta get the boss outa that hoosegow."

Both men climbed into the wooden bucket, and signalled the others up on the ledge to pull up. Slowly the bucket disappeared up the shaft.

Five minutes later, Cutty rolled over and sat up. He said, "Hello, Ted. Did I make that spill look real?"

Painfully, Ted Palmer raised his head. His eyes opened wide. He tried to say something, but couldn't.

Cutty quickly crossed to the youth's side. Taking the canteen from his pocket, he slowly dripped some brandy into Palmer's mouth. Then opening his jacket, he ripped off part of his shirt. Spilling some more brandy on the cloth, Cutty bathed the angry wound in Ted's side.

"Not such a bad hole, Ted. No real damage done. But a coupla more hours without food or drink an' you'd have been a goner." Cutty then bandaged the brandy-saturated cloth over Ted's wound.

Next, Cutty took two hard biscuits from the pocket of his jacket. He broke them into pieces, and soaking them with brandy forced them between the youth's swollen lips. After that, he gave Ted another drink.

This time, Ted raised his hand to the canteen, and tilted it higher.

Cutty grinned. "You keep this up, Ted, an' you'll have a jag on."

"Thanks," murmured Ted Palmer faintly. Then he lay back to rest.

Cutty kept up a running fire of talk. "Name's Cutty Lorant, Ted. Brazos puncher—till I hit this here town. I jus' stuck my nose into this deputy business. Your sister, Doris, was plumb worried 'bout you, so bein' a natural busybody I horned into things."

The wounded deputy raised his head again. His voice was stronger this time. "How—is—Doris—"

"Fine, Ted. An', fella, you have one mighty fine sister. Gosh, Doris will be plumb glad to see you well again."

It was then that Ted's weary mind seemed to remember something. "Didn't —that gunnie—plug you?"

Cutty shook his head, taking off his jacket. "You see, Ted, this here sheep wool stops bullets. The slug comes a-spinnin' into the wool—an' jus' natural-like spins itself into a cocoon. I once read 'bout it in a newspaper. Some trick —a wool jacket stoppin' a bullet."

Then Cutty quickly unwound the rope from his waist. Placing the canteen at Ted's side, he said, "Go easy on it, old hand. You're gonna be in darkness again. I'll need the candle to make the top of the shaft—"

"You—gonna—try to—"

"Sure. You're lookin' at the best ropin' jasper o' the Brazos country." Gripping Ted's hand, Cutty went to the bottom of the shaft with his rope and candle. Placing the candle as high as possible on the wall of the shaft, he looked up for a ledge wide enough to afford a foothold.

He saw one some twenty feet up. Making a small loop, he threw the lass rope. The narrowness of the shaft handicapped his throw. Next time, he had better luck in gauging the cast. The lass rope held. Cutty pinched out the candle, put it in his pocket, and climbed up the rope. On that ledge, he lighted the candle again. When the rope caught firmly on the next ledge higher up, he pocketed the candle again, and climbed.

THERE was no bolt on the trapdoor, Cutty found when it gave noiselessly to the lift of his shoulder. Then he recognized the voice of Hugh Price. There were two other voices, too.

Hugh Price's voice came to the listening puncher:

"The sheriff has gotta stay in Hellspur tonight. The townspeople are kickin' up a great ruckus 'bout Lorant bein' missin'. Then, with Janton here, we'll grab off those two big herds at Twin Arrows."

"Them punchers up at Twin Arrows will be ready for the drive. Maybe on the lookout for trouble," piped up one of the others.

"Let 'em! They'll get a skinful. I've got some more boys ridin' north. They oughta be here by noon."

"Only more ways to divide the *dinero*," grumbled the other.

"Jus' leave that to me," and Price guffawed loudly.

The others joined in, for they knew the meaning of Price's laugh.

"All right," said Price getting to his feet, "we'll go out to the deputy's office an' tell the townspeople how hellish it is that Lorant has disappeared. An' don't forget that he let me out of the hoosegow an' apologized to me before he rid off. You, José, stick around here."

When Price and the other hombre went out, Cutty silently lifted the trapdoor, and crouched behind the bar. He made his way to José, and gave him a skull-crashing blow.

Then Cutty slowly walked down the street to the office of the deputy sheriff.

A great crowd was gathered there. Head and shoulders over them all was Hugh Price. He was standing close to Doris Palmer.

Cutty had all he could do to keep from running down. Then he saw his roan standing at the hitchrack. On its kak-horn dangled his cartridge belt. And in the holster was his .44.

Old Pop Hankins was there glowering at Price.

Cutty stood on the fringe of the crowd. He stared at Old Pop Hankins. Pop seemed to feel the eyes on him, for he shifted his glance for a moment. When he came abreast of Cutty, the puncher whispered:

"Pop, watch that mutt with the beard over there," Cutty nodded toward one of the gunmen who had been in the mine. "You keep an eye on him, Pop. I'll take care of Price—and that skinny gent."

Without attracting any attention Pop moved to his position.

Cutty then walked through the crowd with his head down.

"Hey, José," bellowed Price. "I told—"

When Cutty reached his horse, he whirled around, pulling off José's sombrero.

Cutty snatched his walnut-gripped .44 from its holster, at the same moment bringing up José's gun. He yelled:

"It's sure gonna be hellish—now!"

Hugh Price's Colt came up like the dart of a snake's tongue. But he never got around to pulling the trigger. Two slugs, roaring from Cutty's guns, pushed both of his eyes out the back of his head.

The skinny hombre who had shot at Cutty in the mine had his thoughts of ghosts rudely interrupted. A .44 slug in the stomach doubled him in half.

Pop was a mite slow in getting into the scrap. The bearded outlaw he was watching suddenly backed into him, spilling the old timer backwards. But Pop sat down with his gun exploding as he hit the ground. The outlaw's back arched like a drawn bow. Then he folded up.

Cutty had been mighty carful of his lead, for Doris was standing next to Hugh Price. And when Cutty dropped the skinny hombre, he leaped over, shielding Doris with his body.

"Ted's safe, Doris," he told the girl. "I'm going over an' lift him out of the mine." Then Cutty's face gleamed. "Hey, Pop. Wire the sheriff that he's got two deputies in Hellspur. Tell him that one o' them is lookin' for another job—an' he likes this country right well."

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5.50-17	3.35	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
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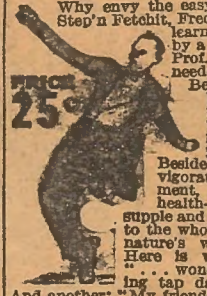

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